

Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions

(or: *The Last Temptation of Harry Potter*)

Chapter One

Sowing the Seeds

He opened his bedroom door cautiously and put his face against the sliver of space between it and the jamb (banging his glasses in the process), surveying the upstairs hall. There was his aunt's and uncle's bedroom door at the other end, still closed. He could hear his uncle's snoring through it, rather like you can hear fireworks if you put your head really close to them.

The early morning sun whispered in through the small window at the top of the stairs. His foreshortened view of the wall to his right meant that he was only able to see the doorknobs for the two bedrooms and the bathroom there. He listened for a sound that *wasn't* his uncle; otherwise the house seemed to be utterly silent. Of course, the Cold Stream Guards could have been giving a concert in the living room. There was no way of knowing.

Harry Potter opened his bedroom door enough to go through. He was dressed for running except for the fact that his running shoes hung by their laces from his left hand. He crept stealthily toward Aunt Petunia's and Uncle Vernon's room, then turned left to descend the stairs. So far so good. The snoring had made it impossible for him to hear anything else, but he hoped now that it would also conceal any sound *he* might make. Unfortunately, he knew that no amount of noise could conceal his Harry-scent...

Damn! Harry thought, halfway down the stairs. He looked down to where his new nemesis stood, waiting for him with teeth bared, a very low growl rumbling through his chest, small tail twitching back and forth ominously.

Harry narrowed his eyes, glaring at Dunkirk. This was getting old. He'd been home for almost a week, and rather than improving, his relationship with the little Yorkshire terrier had deteriorated from a high point of Dunkirk failing to sink his teeth into Harry's hand the first time he tried to pet him.

Getting out of the house to go running in the mornings had grown progressively more difficult. Harry had started to wonder what his aunt was doing with the off-white dog while he and his uncle were at their jobs every day. He pictured her giving Dunkirk photos of him and rewarding the dog with love and kibble if he succeeded in thoroughly shredding the images of Harry. Dogs are creatures of conditioning, he knew. Pavlov was hardly the first to discover this.

He considered his options now. He could leap over the banister and sprint toward the kitchen and try to make it out the back door before Dunkirk reached him, or he could try leaping right over him and bolting for the front door, a mere ten feet from the foot of the stairs. What to do, what to do...

Finally he put his leg over the banister. The small dog darted down the hall to intercept him, and Harry quickly took his leg down again, dashing down the rest of the stairs, stopping to grab the knob on the front door.

But the dog was onto him already, turning and reaching him too quickly for Harry to escape. He sank his teeth into Harry's sock, right above the heel. His teeth scraped Harry's skin, but did not get a purchase on his flesh. Harry lifted his foot, the tenacious dog dangling from the sock by his teeth. He shook his foot repeatedly, but the dog continued to cling.

"Geroft! Stupid animal--" he grunted, standing on one foot and continuing to swing Dunkirk through the air. The sock was stretching out of shape and slipping off his foot with each kick. The terrier hung on.

"Sodding--little--" Harry gasped as he continued to try to shake the dog. Without warning the sock finally slipped off his foot completely. The dog went flying down the hall, sock still in his mouth. He landed heavily on all four of his little stumpy legs, momentarily shaken. Harry was breathing heavily, anger roiling through him. Suddenly he had a thought; he knew what might put off Dunkirk once and for all.

He stared at the dog and concentrated on making the change--and in a second, he was standing on all fours in his own front hall, his mane tickling his back, his long tail swishing, a low rumbling purr vibrating throughout his body.

The Yorkshire terrier's eyes grew so large that Harry could actually see white around their edges. His jaw dropped, and the sock fell onto the floor. Harry gave a soft *roar*, hardly even a fraction as loud as Vernon Dursley's snores, and the little animal suddenly gave a soft frightened-sounding whimper and scuttled into the living room through the slightly-open door. Harry saw him disappear beneath the ottoman, his buff-colored tail still visible under the slipcover. Harry changed back to his human form, joints aching. He stood in the doorway of the living room, looking at the dog's exposed tail, which was shaking vigorously. He felt somewhat ashamed of himself for a moment, scaring a little dog by appearing to become a lion...

But then Dunkirk emerged from the ottoman, and, spying Harry, ran full tilt at him *again*, as though nothing had changed. Harry swiftly slammed the door shut. He could hear Dunkirk on the other side, frantically scrabbling at the wood, trying to get it open again, and continuously growling. Harry stopped feeling sorry for him. If Dunkirk was going to

leave him alone, it was obviously going to take more than seeing Harry change into a golden griffin just once.

Harry retrieved his sock from the floor of the hall and started to put it back on, but it was sodden with dog saliva and stretched out of shape. He plodded up to his room with the ruined sock, threw it in the rubbish and retrieved a fresh sock. He returned to the front hall and sat down on the steps to tie his shoes, grimacing. He'd let a stupid little dog (still heard attacking the living room door) get to him and he'd performed magic outside of school. He didn't think anyone would find out--he wasn't even going to have to register as an Animagus until after he finished his seventh year of school--but he still needed to exercise more restraint. If Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon had seen that, he thought, there would have been hell to pay.

As he left, he could still hear Dunkirk scratching at the living room door. He shook his head, then went out into the bright summer morning, pulling the cool, still-dewy air into his lungs as his feet pounded the pavement, running toward the village. It had been a conscious decision of his to run a different route than he had with Dudley and Hermione. He used to turn left upon leaving the house; now he turned right, the spire of St. Bede's and the clock tower of his old school rising up above the houses and shops and growing larger as he neared them. He'd never really minded the quaint village of Little Whinging, just the fact that he had to live there with the Dursleys. He didn't have much to compare it to, never have been--anywhere (in the Muggle world). In the wizarding world, he hadn't been much of anywhere, either, but he'd now been to an opera and a ceilidh at the Hogsmeade town hall and to a party at a private home in Hogsmeade. He'd also been to the Ministry of Magic in London (or rather *under* London).

Harry started slowing down, then stopped. He put his hand on the stone gateposts at the entrance to the graveyard. After a moment's hesitation, he entered. He reached Dudley's grave quickly. He stood looking at the mound of dirt, which was still higher than the surrounding grass. Someone had scattered grass seed in the soil, and small green shoots were starting to burst through. Soon the stone (which wasn't in place yet) would be the only indication of where Dudley had been buried; the earth would be flat again, all of it covered in endless grass. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes...

Harry turned from Dudley's grave and walked up the hill where he now knew his parents were buried. He knelt by their stone and pulled some weeds from the grass that blanketed them. Shredding the weeds with his fingers, he spread the bits around the roots of the calla lilies he'd planted on either side of the stone. He'd put the plants in two days before. He liked the idea of coming to their grave in the mornings, just sitting peacefully. He wondered whether he should talk to them, or to Dudley, but even though he was utterly alone, the idea embarrassed him. He wasn't a talking-to-dead-people sort. It annoyed him when this was done in

television programs or films, largely to let the audience hear a person's thoughts. He would have felt self-conscious doing it.

After a little while, Harry patted the stone fondly, then left to resume his running. When he returned to the house on Privet Drive, although his aunt and uncle hadn't seen him turn into a golden griffin, there was still hell to pay. When he opened the door, he immediately missed the peace and quiet of his uncle's snoring. His head promptly started hurting, from both the noise and the fact that he was trying to process nothing but sentence fragments.

"...could have been hurt, poor baby..."

"...your aunt in hysterics..."

"...crying and crying..."

"...peed on my favorite chair..."

"...just a sweet little baby..."

"...door needs painting now, scratches all over..."

Harry winced as his uncle grabbed his ear and pulled him into the living room to see the deep gouges the dog had put in the paint on the inside of the door. What am I, six? he thought.

"Gerroff!" he yelped, escaping from his uncle's grip. "He attacked me! I was just trying to get out!" He was momentarily surprised to find that he was taller than both of them. When had that happened? Not that it was helpful at this moment.

His Aunt Petunia stood in the doorway, cuddling Dunkirk in her arms like a baby. "He's claustrophobic! He was scared. Weren't you my little Dunkirk..." she cooed to him. Harry rolled his eyes; his head was really throbbing now. *If only they would shut up! If only--*

"Aaaah!" he cried in agony, pressing his hands on either side of his head as the pain spiked. His eyes were squeezed shut; on the insides of his eyelids, he could see shadowy figures in a glen. Dappled shadows...a green cast on everything...it would be a beautiful summer morning in a cool, leafy forest if it weren't for the torture...

The man writhed on the ground, on the leaves. Harry couldn't see his face; he could see the wizard casting the spell, crackling light connected his wand with the victim's body. The red eyes seemed to bore right into Harry's, even though that was impossible, he wasn't really there. As the torture continued, his scar began to feel hot. He knew he was still

screaming because his throat hurt, but he felt like his ears were stopped up. All he could hear were the sounds coming directly into his brain from that deceptively pleasant-looking wood.

The tall, thin wizard with the red snake-eyes lifted his wand at last, breaking the spell. The man who'd been writhing on the ground panted and tried to rise. It took some effort. When he was finally on his feet, Harry had a glimpse of his face. Then it was as though a memory charm had been placed upon him, and a split second later, he had no idea whose face he'd seen. I know him! he thought. Who--?

But now the instrument of torture was pointing at the crook of the man's left elbow.

I know him I know him I know him I know him...

"MORSMORDRE!"

Harry wrinkled up his nose at the smell of the burning flesh. It was as thought he were there. The man cried out in agony as the mark was seared into his arm. The stench filled Harry's nostrils. The man's tormented howling increased in pitch as the mark became part of him. Harry's scar was still throbbing. He may still have been screaming, he didn't know.

Finally, the man was silent. He had gone down on his knees, where he remained, his breathing labored. His torturer put his hand on his shoulder, almost fondly, saying, "At last. I acknowledge you as my heir."

"Aaaaah!" Harry's scream continued. He could hear himself again. He opened his eyes and looked around. His scar hurt, but not as persistently. His uncle was cowering behind his armchair; his aunt, still clutching the writhing dog (trying desperately to escape her grip) had backed up against the table in the hall.

Harry willed himself to stop screaming, but it was difficult. *The heir. I know the heir.* He just didn't know *who* it was. Why can't I remember? he wondered. Maybe it was like the anti-Muggle magic that kept people from seeing things like the Leaky Cauldron. A Muggle might actually see it for a split second, but then his or her eyes would glide past, forgetting about it. *Where do I know him from?* he wondered, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Damn! The image was slipping away from him again.

He swallowed and looked uncertainly at his aunt and uncle.

"S--sorry about shutting Dunkirk in the living room. I--I have to get ready for work..."

He sprinted up the stairs to the bathroom. He slammed the door shut and leaned heavily against it, his heart thudding in his ears. I need to write to Sirius, he thought desperately. I need to tell him. And I need to remember. *Remember remember remember...*

He removed his sweaty running clothes and stepped into the shower. Voldemort has his heir by his side now, he thought. And it's someone I know. Is it someone I trust? All he knew was that it was someone tall, with dark hair and parchment-colored skin. Hell, he thought. That only describes half the men and boys I know...At least it lets off the Weasleys and Gilderoy Lockhart and Lee Jordan...Great. That really narrows it down.

While he showered, he thought of some more people it couldn't be. Seamus Finnigan, Will Flitwick, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom...This was getting him nowhere.

He needed to send Hedwig off for the rest of the summer anyway. He couldn't risk Mrs. Figg asking questions about the snowy owl. He hadn't actually stayed with her since he'd found out he was a wizard on his eleventh birthday. After work he would be going to Mrs. Figg's house rather than returning to Privet Drive. His trunk and summer clothes had been taken over there the previous evening. After he'd hauled his trunk up to Mrs. Figg's sewing room, where he'd be sleeping on an old couch, he had stood in her living room whilst the Dursleys recounted all of the things she wasn't to let him "get away with."

"Don't you let him contradict you. Tell him who's the boss."

"Don't let him weasel out of chores. Especially cleaning up after himself..."

"Don't let him watch the telly after ten o'clock at night..."

"Don't let him up from the dinner table until he's cleaned his plate, including vegetables..."

This from the couple who was trying to starve me two years ago, Harry thought. As the litany had continued, he had stood grimacing, his arms crossed over his chest. He had wished that he smoked, so he could have stood there with a cigarette hanging carelessly from his lip, a pack of them clearly visible under the sleeve of his T-shirt. He had also wished he still had Sandy, the garden snake, who he used to wear wrapped around his left upper arm, and maybe also a bone earring, like Bill Weasley, or a tattoo...

If he was going to be, in essence, accused of being the worst juvenile delinquent since Billy the Kid, he wanted to look the part. But instead, he had waited grumpily, listening to the list of things he was to be forbidden (this included puddings of any kind--fine with him; he hated Mrs. Figg's puddings). While he had listened, his gaze had wandered around the room, which looked as he remembered it, which was to say, it looked remarkably similar to the tents Mr. Weasley had borrowed for them to sleep in at the Quidditch World Cup. It appeared that a battalion of little old ladies armed with crochet hooks had been unleashed upon the place, for there was hardly a piece of upholstery without a complement of a dozen antimacassars or a horizontal surface completely unobsured by doilies.

When his aunt and uncle were finally done and had paid Mrs. Figg for the services she would be rendering while they were away, they had gone to the door of her odd cabbage-smelling house.

Mrs. Figg had lifted up her head and surveyed Harry critically. "I understand you're working for that *Dick*." It had taken him a moment to realize that she was saying his name, not dropping into uncharacteristic profanity. "Doing landscaping, eh? Well, you can help me in my garden as well. Make yourself useful. And my back's been bothering me. You can clean the cat boxes while you're staying here. Both of them. Twice a day. Cats are very fastidious. You can't expect them to just wallow in filth."

Harry had grimaced. He was glad he'd be working for Dick much of the time. This was shaping up to be far worse than when he was ten. She'd tried to get him to clean cat hair off the upholstery once, and he'd instead started to suck antimacassars into the belly of the Hoover. It was an effective way to get out of cleaning (and no accidental magic was involved), but he wasn't sure how he'd avoid working in her garden or cleaning the cat boxes.

Harry went to his bedroom when he was done his shower and dressed for work. He quickly wrote a note to Sirius, telling him about the waking dream, seeing Voldemort initiating his own heir. Harry stopped while he was writing, staring into space. There were two things that struck him as odd. First was that Voldemort was doing this during the day, and secondly, that they had seemed to be alone. If there were other Death Eaters present, Harry hadn't seen them. Does anyone else know who the heir is? he wondered. If I remember, will I be the only one?

He sent Hedwig off with the letter for Sirius, plus a short note for Hermione. He'd warned her and Ron that birthday greetings and subsequent letters would have to come to Mrs. Figg's by the British postal system. He didn't want her to have a fit from several owls showing up at her house on the thirty-first of July. It wouldn't be a problem for Hermione, but he remembered the time Mrs. Weasley had sent a letter by regular post to the Dursleys, covered in so many stamps that the postman

had rung the doorbell so he could deliver it face-to-face and enquire exactly who would make such a mistake. Harry's Uncle Vernon had been livid, worried that the postman might think he and Harry's aunt were peculiar in some way (in *any* way). They aspired to be the *epitome* of normal, and would broach no one destroying this illusion.

He sat down to read again the most recent letter he'd received from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

I know I just wrote to you the day before yesterday, but that wasn't about what I'm actually doing on a day-to-day basis, so I wanted to write to you again. I hope you don't mind that this letter isn't quite as descriptive.

Harry grinned. The other letter had been descriptive all right, describing what she wanted to do with him the next time they had a chance to be alone. He'd written a note to her saying he was safely home but that Sandy had left him, and Hedwig had returned with *that* in the middle of the night. He'd found himself taking a cold shower at two in the morning after reading it.

Sirius goes running with me in the mornings, in dog form. He sits as a dog in the surgery waiting room much of the day, too. Mum and Dad will only see people who've come to them before, no one new. Sirius brought some dark magic detectors with him. None of them have gone off, but there was one fellow Sirius wouldn't let into the surgery yesterday. He growled at him and the man backed off and ran out.

I was sitting in the waiting room reading. Mum came out, wondering where her two o'clock was, and I told her what Sirius had done, hoping she wouldn't be angry. She surprised me by laughing and saying that she didn't care if he ever came back. Evidently he acted very silly when he was on laughing gas and tended to try to touch my mum in ways that only my dad should touch her. I was shocked! I mean, to think of someone making passes at my mum! Not that Mum doesn't still look nice. You know what I mean. Think of the Pensieve. Anyway, she was glad of Sirius yesterday. At dinner (he's in human form then) she asked him why he'd done it. He said he just didn't trust the man; something set off this alarm in him. Dog instinct. He apologized, but Mum told him not to. "Well spotted!" she said, laughing.

Sirius goes to meet the other operatives at night. We're perfectly safe because of the spells protecting the house. We can't really have all of the same spells on the surgery because

it's a public place. I'm not usually in the surgery; we have a courtyard in the center of the house where I can read and get some sun. If it's cloudy, I'll go see how Mum and Dad are doing. I missed them so, during the past year.

And I miss you! I had a dream about you last night. You were wearing your kilt, and only your kilt...

Harry grinned, continuing to read for a little bit. So much for this letter not being as "descriptive" as the other one. He didn't finish reading all of it (he'd just left the shower and didn't have time for another). Folding the letter, he shoved it deep into his back pocket.

He picked up another letter from his desk. Like the previous year, it had arrived not long after he'd returned home. It was from McGonagall, welcoming him back in September as a sixth-year prefect. It also informed him that Liam Quirke was to be Head Boy, and Cho Chang would be Head Girl. Harry was happy for her. They'd voted at the last prefect meeting of the year, which was attended by the staff, as they would also be voting. Hermione had wanted Katie to win, since she was from Gryffindor, and Harry hadn't told her he'd voted for Cho. He hoped his vote alone hadn't cost Katie the win. None of them found out who had won until receiving the letters. Most of the time, the six prefects from each house voted for their own (sixth-years of course voting for themselves) and the heads-of-house also generally voted for their house members, so realistically, it was the other staff who decided it. He suspected that most of the other staff would vote for Cho anyway, so his vote probably hadn't mattered; but he'd felt like doing it anyway. He certainly couldn't imagine many teachers voting for the Slytherin sixth-year girl, Regina something...let alone Eloise Midgen, from Hufflepuff.

Harry read further down the letter, to where the names of the new fifth-year prefects were listed. Under Gryffindor were the names *Anthony Perugia* and *Virginia Weasley*. He smiled. McGonagall must have gotten over the Potions dungeon stunt. Ginny did have the best marks...and Harry was not at all surprised about Tony. He'd have been shocked if it were Colin Creevey, who *still* tended to lose his way going to classes. And perhaps Tony would join them on the Quidditch team, and Zoey Russell, one of Ginny's roommates. Harry looked forward to getting to know some of the students in Ginny's year a little better.

Harry tucked his letter away in his desk. There was no need to take it along. He looked around his barren room; he wouldn't be seeing it again for another year. His aunt and uncle had scrapped the idea of going to Portugal now that they had Dunkirk. Instead they were taking a cruise on a ship that allowed dogs. They would be stopping first in the Channel Islands, then the Azores, various points along the Spanish coast, through the Straits of Gibraltar and round the Mediterranean. Whenever they pulled into a port, Dunkirk would stay on board while they went ashore.

Harry had a feeling Aunt Petunia wouldn't actually be going ashore very much.

He arrived in the kitchen as his uncle was tucking into his eggs. His aunt was warming Dunkirk's sausages. The small dog was already at the table, looking expectantly at his empty plate. Harry grabbed his toast quickly, as the dog growled whenever he reached out his arm. Harry hoped Dunkirk's food would be ready soon, before he mistook one of Harry's fingers for a sausage.

They ate silently. No one mentioned the little screaming fit Harry had had in the living room. He also tried to banish the memory from his mind, but attempting this only made the memory more persistent. His aunt and uncle amazed him; it was as though by not looking at or thinking about magic, it would just disappear, not exist. He finished quickly and rose to go.

"Well," he said awkwardly. "Have a good trip." His uncle *harrumphed* in lieu of acknowledging Harry's words. His aunt evidently looked on this as one last opportunity to harangue him.

"You make yourself useful to Mrs. Figg. And don't forget to get yourself over here to tend our garden on the weekend. I don't want to come home and find a jungle! And *whatever* you do--"

"No doing what I'm not supposed to do out of school. Yes, yes. I know, I know." He couldn't even say, "I won't do magic." That would be every bit as bad as actually doing it, in their eyes. He was *very* glad they hadn't seen his Animagus form earlier.

"Don't you give Mrs. Figg any lip like that. And mind you send off that owl--"

"I already did. I wrote to my godfather this morning and asked him to take care of Hedwig for the rest of the summer. He can send her to me at school."

But it seemed that they'd gone back to ignoring him. Right, he thought.

"Goodbye. I'm off to work." Still nothing. Unless you counted Dunkirk turning his head and growling softly at him. Right, he thought again. He opened the door and left, still looking at them for some recognition of the fact that he was leaving. He got none before he finished closing the door. Oh, well. He probably shouldn't have expected any change, even after Dudley. Life was going on at number four Privet Drive.

* * * * *

Harry leaned back on the grass contentedly, feeling the sun warming his bare chest. He'd had a good lunch (the couple at number seven Magnolia Crescent was feeding them rather well) and he felt at peace. He liked working with Nigel, Trevor and Sam, turning the front, rear and side gardens of the house into a tropical paradise (or as close as one could come to one in Surrey).

Nigel and Trevor were brothers, twenty-two and twenty-four. Despite the fact that they looked almost identical and that Trevor was only two years Nigel's elder, he had an air of authority that Nigel did not. They had dark hair and eyes and brows arched so severely that they both looked perpetually surprised. Sam was the eldest of them all, somewhere in his thirties, but taciturn and clearly not interested in being the boss. He had reddish-brown hair and brown eyes and an amazing collection of tattoos all over his chest, arms, calves--and probably areas of his body only his girlfriend Vera saw (her name was on his forearm). From things he said and Trevor and Nigel said, Harry gathered that he'd recently been in prison.

Harry hadn't actually seen Dick since he'd started work. Trevor was in charge on this job; Dick was supervising some work in nearby New Stokington. On Harry's first day, he'd reported to Trevor, who'd introduced him to the homeowners, Bobbie and Terry Galbraith. They owned several shops in London and outlying areas which sold surplus military clothing from around the world, altered by Bobbie to be more stylish for "today's look." (The design was by Bobbie; the sewing was carried out by immigrant girls in their late teens and early twenties, according to Nigel.) It felt to Harry like this had been done before, but he didn't say so to Mrs. Galbraith, who was paying him to relandscape her property, not critique her business.

Trevor had knocked on the door on that first morning, his hand on Harry's shoulder, when Bobbie Galbraith answered, wearing fatigue pants and a tailored blue blazer over a waistcoat that looked more like a bullet-proof vest. She also sported high-heeled combat boots.

"'Ello, Missus. Good mornin' to ye. This 'ere's 'Arry Potter, a new lad. 'E'll be working' wif us on yer job."

She had looked him up and down appraisingly. "All right then. Terry and I have to go to London. We'll be back late."

"Very well, Missus," Trevor had answered. Harry had a hard time not mentally superimposing green skin and large protruding eyes on Trevor; as he had the same name as Neville Longbottom's toad, it was all Harry could think of every time he spoke with him.

Suddenly, Mr. Galbraith appeared, pushing past his wife and nodding at Trevor and Harry, while calling over his shoulder to her, "Come on, love! The traffic's supposed to be a bitch..."

She rushed past them, slamming the door behind her. The Galbraiths strode purposefully toward the drive and got into their expensive German car. Terry pulled on *driving gloves*. Harry had never seen anyone use driving gloves. The car started quickly and smoothly, and in the blink of an eye, they were gone. Harry was rather certain they were going well above the speed-limit for Magnolia Crescent.

Harry liked what Trevor had said to Bobbie. He was one of the lads now. He enjoyed working with Sam and Nigel and Trevor. They were easy-going but didn't mind hard work. They accepted him unquestioningly and didn't ask about his scar. At twelve every day, they let themselves into the Galbraiths' kitchen, where there was food left for them in the fridge, including a bottle of stout for each of them. Harry declined his and just drank water the first day. Trevor spoke to Bobbie, and after that she supplied Harry with a Coke.

"She thought you was eighteen, she did," Trevor told him with a nudge and a wink. Harry flushed at the thought of Mrs. Galbraith considering him to be an adult. She reminded him of a brunette Alicia Spinnet (except for her slightly bizarre taste in clothes).

"So," Nigel had said to Harry as they ate lunch, a wicked gleam in his eye. "Y'got yerself a bird, 'Arry?"

Harry was about to admit that he had a snowy owl when he realized Nigel meant a girlfriend. He thought of Hermione, imagining her in the courtyard of her house, sunning herself, possibly in the bikini...and felt himself flush again. Nigel laughed.

"Should I take that bright shade of crimson as a 'yes,' 'Arry?"

He laughed along with them, taking another bite of his sandwich, nodding.

"Thought y'might. Glasses aside, I rather got the impression y'might be beatin'em off wif a stick."

"Wif *what* stick is the question!" Trevor interjected, nudging Harry again.

He felt warm from the neck up once more. Trevor and Nigel laughed knowingly, exchanging sly looks, while Sam's quiet protesting, "Now, now," went unheeded.

"Well, er, I sort of thought some girls might like me, but they didn't really, they just acted that way because...well, it's really hard to explain..."

"Oh, I see," Trevor said, and for a moment, Harry was panicked that he actually did. "It was a bet, was it?"

"Something like that."

"That's rough, 'Arry, that is," Nigel commiserated. "'Ard on a man's ego, that is."

"But your bird's not like that, is she, Harry?" Sam piped up. Harry thought for a moment about Hermione being on that potion for six months...

"No, no, Sam. Hermione's not like that."

"'Er-MY-oh-nee," Nigel sang. "My, my, she 'as quite the name. Y'done the deed yet wif 'Er-MY-oh-nee, 'Arry?"

Harry immediately turned a deep scarlet. Nigel laughed, but Trevor said, "Nige! That's none o' yer business! Leave the lad alone!"

"Aw, Trev, can't a bloke live vicariously?"

"Nige, you don' even know what that word *means*."

"Do so! An' I jus' used it completely correc', din' I, 'Arry?"

"Er--" Harry said with his mouth full.

"Nigel," Sam said quietly, "even if Harry's been with his bird *once*, he's seen more action than you have in the last three years..."

"Four," Trevor corrected, smiling.

Sam guffawed, and then all of them, even Nigel, succumbed to the contagious laughter. After they were done eating they retired to the rear garden to sun themselves. At first, Harry had found it difficult not to think of Hermione at these times. But today, he was finding it difficult not to picture the tortured man in the wood (and yet he wished he could see his face better...) He was glad when it was time to get back to work, which was a welcome distraction.

When he'd said goodbye to the lads that evening, he walked to Mrs. Figg's house, one block over on Arden Circle. He let himself in with the key he'd been given and called out, "Hello? Mrs. Figg? It's Harry Potter. I'm done work." There was silence for a half-minute; an orange-striped cat rubbed against his legs, and he stooped down to scratch it behind the ears, making it emit a loud purr. Then a door slammed upstairs and he heard Mrs. Figg running down the upstairs hall, followed by her running down the stairs toward Harry. The cat looked alarmed and fled toward the kitchen.

"Hush!" she hissed at him angrily. "What do you think you're doing, coming in here and shouting like that? Act like a civilized human, instead of one raised in a cave."

"Well, actually--" he began, then thought better of it. He'd been about to correct her, tell her it wasn't a cave so much as a cupboard under the stairs. Besides, *she'd* been the one who'd scared her own cat.

But he said, "Yes, ma'am," to her meekly. She put her hand to her breastbone suddenly, and Harry puzzled at this. Was she all right? She *had* come running downstairs rather fast. Which also struck him as odd, now that he thought about it. He'd never seen her move faster than a lackadaisical shuffle. But the hand-on-chest thing suddenly seemed--forced. She didn't appear winded. Was she trying to elicit sympathy from him, or make him feel guilty for making her run? He wasn't sure. He started up the stairs, but she was in his way. He shifted to the left, and she did, too. He shifted back to the right and she moved to block him again.

"Er, after work I'm usually rather in need of a shower," he tried to explain. She stepped aside now and let him pass, but as he ascended the stairs, she followed him closely. When they reached the bathroom, Harry explained lamely, "I think I'll go in alone."

She stepped back from him, as though she'd forgotten that she'd practically been treading on his heels the whole way up the stairs. "I don't want you to forget," she said to him sharply, waving a finger in his face, "that the sewing room and the bathroom are the only rooms you're to go in up here. Understand?"

Harry looked down the hall in either direction at the closed doors, which suddenly seemed quite ominous. The sewing room, where he was staying, was the equivalent in the Dursley house of Dudley's room. Mrs. Figg's room was the same as his aunt's and uncle's. He didn't know what might be in the other two bedrooms, and now, naturally, he felt a burning need to know. He didn't remember being barred from these rooms when he was younger, but perhaps they'd simply been closed and locked and she was confident that he couldn't get into them. She probably thought Harry-the-thinly-veiled-delinquent had a large supply of lock-picks or some such thing.

It was strange to him that Mrs. Figg's house had exactly the same layout as the Dursleys, since it looked so very different. He found himself appreciating for the first time his aunt's spare aesthetic. Their home was always neat and uncluttered, whereas Mrs. Figg's house was the polar opposite.

"I only go in the sewing room and the bathroom. Got it. I'll take my shower now--"

"Make it quick! Dinner will be ready in forty minutes. I'm not keeping it warm for you if you're late!"

"Yes, ma'am," he said again quietly, going into the bathroom.

Dinner was dry chicken, vegetables boiled to the point of being virtually dissolved, starchy boiled potatoes and lemonade without enough sugar. Moussaka seemed to be the only thing she could cook well, and she didn't seem inclined to make it that often. Harry was too hungry to care about the quality of the food. Quantity was all that mattered; he'd built up quite an appetite, working.

After dinner, Mrs. Figg retired to the living room to watch a program the Dursleys were also quite fond of: *Who Wants to Look Stupid in Front of the Whole Country for the Chance to Get Stinking Rich?* His aunt and uncle laughed themselves silly over this show, despite the fact that they themselves seldom knew the answers to even the simplest questions. Mrs. Figg actually seemed to know quite a lot.

"Which Dickens work features the character of Miss Havisham? Oh for mercy's sake, you yob! *Great Expectations!* Not the bloody *Mystery of Edwin Drood!* How in blazes did you get on?" Mrs. Figg's chief enjoyment seemed to come from talking to the contestants, pointing out their obvious mental shortcomings. She also liked to suggest various careers that might be appropriate for a person with sub-par intelligence, such as testing hand grenades for the army (by agreeing to be blown up).

The mention of Dickens gave Harry an idea. He'd been enjoying reading some Dickens in his *Anthology of Muggle Literature*, but he couldn't very well sit around Mrs. Figg's living room reading a book with that title, so he told her that he was going up to his room to read.

"Why can't you read downstairs?" she said sharply. He of course couldn't explain that he didn't want her to see a book with the word "Muggle" in the title, and she jumped to conclusions and assumed that he didn't want to go upstairs to read at all, but to "abuse" himself. Harry reddened, thinking rather angrily that all anyone thought teenage boys thought about was--*Oh yeah*, he remembered. That's right. It was all teenage boys thought about...

He sighed in resignation, looking around the living room. The orange-striped cat was curled in a compact circle near Mrs. Figg's feet, while a black cat with a white bib and feet washed itself next to the table with the television. Then he noticed that Mrs. Figg seemed to have quite a nice selection of books lining the shelves, which were neatly alphabetized. He found a few Dickens novels to choose from, deciding on *Oliver Twist*, which he'd never read. When he opened the book, he discovered that the pages had never been cut. Each stitched folio still had a creased fold facing the outer edge of the book. He could get a letter-opener from her

desk, he supposed, and cut each page as he needed to read it. He knew from a teacher he'd had when he was younger that he shouldn't use something too sharp, so he'd have a nice deckled edge on each page. But somehow, he didn't feel like he wanted to go through that much work just to have something to read. He returned *Oliver Twist* to the shelf and selected *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy. He'd rather enjoyed *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (although it was a bit depressing). He started to open the Hardy, only to discover that this book also had never been read and still had uncut pages. He turned and looked over his shoulder at Mrs. Figg.

"Another genius!" she declared sarcastically. "Monte Carlo cannot be the third-largest city in Italy! It's not *in* sodding Italy! There; a future auto company employee. He can sit in the cars they crash test. Those tests need more realism anyway..."

Harry discreetly removed a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from a shelf. Pages uncut. *Wuthering Heights*. *My Antonia*. *Robinson Crusoe*. *Shane*. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. *Don Quixote*. *Anna Karenina*. *Middlemarch*. *Cry, the Beloved Country*. *Around the World in Eighty Days*. *The Old Man and the Sea*. *Elmer Gantry*.

It didn't matter what the country of origin was or whether the book had originally been written in English or translated. None of the books had cut pages. They'd never been read. Not one.

Right, thought Harry. They're just *decor*. He returned to his initial choice, putting *Oliver Twist* next to a disdainful-looking smoke-grey cat on a doily-covered table and going to the dining room to look in Mrs. Figg's desk for a letter opener. He pulled open one drawer, which immediately squeaked loudly.

"What are you up to?" she said suddenly, calling from the living room. Harry guiltily slammed the drawer shut, startling the cream-colored cat sleeping on the dining room window sill. It blinked, gazing at him with one amber eye and one green eye. He returned to the living room doorway. "I was going to read that book," he said, pointing to where it lay on the table, under the paw of the grey cat, "but the pages weren't cut. I was looking in the desk for a letter opener."

"First of all, stay out of my desk! Second of all, don't be ridiculous. I've read that many times. Of course the pages are cut. The pages on all the books are cut!"

Harry frowned. He went to the table and carefully picked up the book, lifting the cat's paw. The outer edge and top of the pages now had gold leaf, which he didn't remember from before. He rifled through the pages; they all fell in an arc of white tipped with gold, every edge neatly and cleanly machine cut. He surreptitiously pulled off the shelves some of the

other titles he'd glanced at before. All of them had pages that were separate and ready to be read, many of them with silver or gold leaf on the edges.

That's odd, thought Harry. Did I do that with some spontaneous magic? He hadn't meant to.

He sat down to read the book. Immediately, the grey cat curled up in his lap, purring. Harry winced as the sharp claws kneaded his thighs, breathing a sigh of relief as the animal settled down and put its paw over its nose. After reading several chapters, he stopped. He was just finding the story too implausible, and he was also too tired to keep his eyes open any longer. Listening to the cat's purring was lulling him to sleep...

"Minsk!" Mrs. Figg shouted at some unfortunate soul making a fool of himself before the whole country, startling Harry and the cat awake. The grey cat leapt to the floor and stalked out of the room indignantly, presumably to look for a quieter place to sleep. Actually, Harry was glad to be awake again; he'd been reliving seeing the tortured man in the forest...

"And you call yourself a teacher!" Mrs. Figg said accusingly. Harry didn't, so he was rather confused. It took him a moment to realize that she meant the poor man on television who evidently should have said "Minsk" to whatever question he'd just been asked. "If that's what most teachers are like these days, it would certainly explain a lot," she said, sliding her eyes over to him, hinting broadly.

Harry tried to stifle a yawn and rose to go. "I'm going upstairs. I've got work tomorrow."

"Eh? On Saturday?"

"Well, the clients want *someone* working on the job six days a week, so we each take different days off. I picked Wednesday, so I won't have to work on my birthday." Trevor had also had Wednesdays off, so Dick was the Wednesday boss. Harry would probably not see him unless he switched his days around.

"I didn't realize you'd be working Saturdays..."

Harry frowned at her; she seemed to think this was a good thing. Then she noticed him looking at her and scowled at him.

"And when are you going to do something to *my* garden, I'd like to know?"

"I can do something when I get back from work. Good night."

She didn't answer, but turned back to the television. Mrs. Figg made him miss having Sandy to talk to very, very much. He'd had to explain a great many things to Sandy which most people just *knew*, but at least she was always civil. He smiled at the thought; snakes were actually very civilized creatures, in addition to having the Sight. Who knew?

He went up the stairs and prepared for bed. When he emerged from the bathroom after brushing his teeth, he thought one of the doors in the upstairs hall had just closed quickly. He stared at the doors for the other two bedrooms. Nah, he said to himself. I'm just tired.

But as he was dozing off, he thought, *That's funny*. The drawer in Mrs. Figg's desk, the one he'd opened while looking for a letter opener...he remembered for a moment what he'd seen there. How odd...

There were several bottles of ink, in various colors, high-quality parchment in a chamois tone, and several beautiful quills that appeared to be from eagles' tails...

But he was very, very tired, and soon forgot about this and was fast asleep...

* * * * *

On Sunday morning, Harry was careful to be very, very quiet when going downstairs. He'd rather startled Mrs. Figg Saturday morning, coming out of her bedroom in her nightdress but no dressing gown. She hadn't expected him to be up so early. He explained about his running habit (feeling slightly guilty, as though it were a drinking habit) and she had peered at him suspiciously through slits of eyes, looking like she thought the whole purpose of his getting up so early had been to *purposely* catch her out in her nightdress.

When he returned from running on Sunday and had showered, he went down to the kitchen, prepared to scrounge up his own breakfast. The day before, he'd sat expectantly at the dining table for twenty minutes before she pushed open the swinging kitchen door and told him that the food wasn't going to march into the dining room and into his mouth. He was still getting used to being in her house.

He managed to find some slightly stale bread to toast, and located the butter, but no jam or marmalade. The cream-colored cat regarded him sleepily from the top of the fridge, while the black cat wound around his legs, making him move around quite cautiously; he was constantly afraid he was going to step on it. He looked in the fridge; there didn't seem to be any fruit juice, so he filled the kettle and put it on the stove, resigning himself to tea, if only he could find where she hid the teabags...

"*What do you think you're doing?*"

Harry jumped, slamming the cupboard door that had been holding open. As a result, a collection of decorative spoons on the door were rattled off their very small nails and clattered to the counter in a silvery heap. Mrs. Figg's screeched question had rattled him somewhat. The black cat sped from the room, and the cream-colored cat looked on edge, although it remained in sphinx-position on the fridge.

"Now look what you've done! Oh, don't worry about them now. We'll be late for church. What were you looking for, anyway?"

"Tea. What do you mean, church?"

"It's in the tin on top of the fridge." It took Harry a moment to realize that she meant the tea, not the church. "You know," she went on, "that place in the village with the rather tall tower and the bells that have been making a racket all morning. Church. I don't want to miss Mr. Babcock's sermon. I suggested the topic to him: 'Why Young People Don't Think Rules Apply to Them.' I highly recommend you pay attention. I'll be asking you questions later."

As he reached for the tea tin next to the cat, Harry wondered briefly what the scriptural text could possibly be for such a sermon, but he told her, "I'm not coming to church with you." He looked into the tea tin. *Oh hell,* he thought. *Loose tea.* He grimaced and looked about in a bewildered fashion. Mrs. Figg sighed and thrust a silver-colored metal ball at him with perforations all round it. He took the proffered tea ball and used the scoop in the tea tin to fill one half of the ball after opening it. At least there won't be any tea leaves in my cup, he thought...

"You're not coming, eh?" she said menacingly, as though she were looking forward to fighting with him about it.

"No. I'm going over to Privet Drive to work in the garden. I promised my aunt I would. I did *not* promise her I'd go to church." Harry put the tea ball in the old brown teapot sitting in the middle of the breakfast table. He sat down to read the Sunday paper which he'd brought in, waiting for her next salvo.

"I see," was all she said, and Harry was surprised that she sounded a little hurt. He glanced at her around the page of the newspaper he was holding before his face. She looked distracted, and, he realized, quite old. How old was she? he wondered. He suddenly felt rather ashamed of himself. Perhaps she just wanted the company, walking into the village for the service and back again, not having to sit alone in her pew box...

But he shook off this feeling. If I go today, he thought, she'll expect me to do it the rest of the summer. Better to start as we mean to go on.

When the water was hot enough, she filled the teapot and took some cream from the fridge. The black cat returned now, rubbing against her leg quite lovingly now that she had a pitcher of cream in her hand; she shooed it away. Harry was watching her but trying not to seem to be doing so. He was only about six years older than the last time he'd been in this house; why did it feel so different? Perhaps because as a ten-year-old, he didn't have the same autonomy as an almost sixteen-year-old. I'm almost sixteen, Harry thought. In just over three weeks. He suddenly felt very happy about this.

"You know," he told her while he buttered his toast, "in about three weeks, it'll be my sixteenth birthday..."

She jerked her head up, eyes wide, as though she'd forgotten something.

"Birthday!" she said suddenly. Harry frowned. What was with her?

"Yeah, my birth--"

"Stay away!"

"What?" He stared at her. She wasn't backing away from him, and he hadn't been moving toward her. What was she going on about?

"From the house. Today. Take as long as you need to in Petunia's garden. Don't come back before four o'clock."

He furrowed his brow. "Why?"

"Never you mind!" she said angrily, her voice rising in pitch. "Just stay away!"

This was getting stranger and stranger, he thought. Fine, I'll let myself into my own house when I'm done in the garden. I can watch television or play games on Dudley's computer.

Dudley's computer.

Harry grimaced; no, one thing he did *not* want to do was go into Dudley's room. He'd thought of it many times, having access to all of the wonderful toys and gadgets that his aunt and uncle had showered on their son but not him. As far as he knew, they hadn't changed a thing in Dudley's room, it would all be as Harry remembered it. But now...

"Did you hear me?" she demanded, pulling down the newspaper hiding his face from her. He nodded at her.

"Yes, yes. I'll stay away."

When they were done the eating and clearing up, he helped her fill the cats' food and water dishes. Then they left the house together, walking in opposite directions. He whistled as he approached Privet Drive; his aunt and uncle (and Dunkirk) wouldn't be at the house, he could work in the garden during the cool of the morning and then decide how to spend the rest of his day until four.

But the cool of the morning wasn't so cool; he was already getting quite warm just walking the few blocks to his house. When he was not quite there, he decided that it had been a mistake to wear jeans instead of shorts, so he turned on his heel and headed back to Mrs. Figg's house. She'd said not to return until four, but she wouldn't be there, he reasoned. She'd never know.

He let himself in and immediately froze; music was floating down from the second floor into the entrance hall. *Someone's broken into the house!* he thought. *To listen to the radio?* his brain rationally answered. He lowered the umbrella he'd picked up from the rack near the front door. He was being ridiculous. It was probably a clock radio. Mrs. Figg had probably forgotten she'd set it for this time. Or else one of the cats had walked on the "on" button. The orange striped cat was trying to rub against his legs again; he'd already pegged her as the "greeter" cat. He ignored her this time.

He still carried the umbrella as he walked up the stairs toward the music, but carrying it more like a closed umbrella and less like an instrument of war. Then he realized that the music was coming from one of the off-limit rooms on the second floor. Now what do I do? he wondered. He grimaced. Finally, he came to the conclusion that he should change into his shorts and leave. The music would eventually stop. There was no reason to go into that middle room, the one that was the guest room at his house.

He forced himself to go to the sewing room and change, to ignore the music emanating from behind the closed door. But when he emerged and was about to descend the stairs, he heard an unmistakably human sound from behind the door of the forbidden room where the music was playing.

"Ow!" was all he heard, after a muffled bang. Someone had walked into something and been injured; an intruder *had* broken into the house. Evidently people *did* engage in breaking and entering for the purpose of listening to radios. Harry hefted the umbrella in his right hand; he'd been preparing to return it to the rack downstairs, but now he approached the closed door, wishing it were his wand, his heart beating loudly and painfully.

He stared at the knob. He slowly reached his hand out and tested it. It wouldn't budge. The door was locked. He slowly removed his hand again. Concentrate, he thought. You can do this...He closed his eyes, focusing all of his energy on the door. It's a simple enough spell. Dumbledore does

things without his wand. It's just an unlocking spell...He opened his eyes again and held his hand in the air hovering about three inches above the doorknob. "*Alohomora!*" he said forcefully, his eyes boring into the door.

It worked. The door swung open, more slowly than when he'd used a wand to perform the same spell, but it did open. Harry immediately saw who had barked his shin and said "ow." He stood with his jaw dropped, blinking in disbelief. The other person was equally shocked, staring at him open-mouthed and speechless.

Harry walked into the room, still holding the umbrella a bit like a weapon. They circled each other, still no less shocked. Finally, Harry lowered the umbrella and swallowed, his brain trying to process the ramifications of this surprising discovery. The other person finally found his ability to speak again.

"Potter!"

Harry shook his head and stared. "Malfoy..."

"What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing in Mrs. Figg's house? She's a Muggle! I thought you were going to be with your old nanny! Did Dumbledore set this up?" Malfoy's face was a parade of perplexed expressions.

"Nanny Bella *is* my old nurse. Mrs. Figg? Who's Mrs. Figg?"

Nanny Bella. Mrs. Figg. Harry wracked his brain. Bella. Figg. Arabella. Arabella Figg. Something Dumbledore had said over a year ago, about the old crowd...

He looked at Draco Malfoy. "Your Nanny Bella and my Mrs. Figg are the same person."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Come again?"

"You heard me. It has to be. It would explain so much...why Dumbledore would have let the Dursleys use her to baby-sit me, especially when I was little. She's not a Muggle; she's a witch!"

"You never knew she was a witch?" Malfoy looked disdainful.

"I didn't even know I was a wizard until my eleventh birthday, Malfoy. And until a few days ago, the last time I saw Mrs. Figg was when I was ten. I didn't even know the wizarding world existed the last time I saw her."

Malfoy sat on the bed, frowning darkly. "Yeah, well, speaking of birthdays, today's mine. Whoopee. Happy birthday to me." He reminded Harry of Eeyore.

"Really? July seventh is your birthday? That's the seventh month and seventh day."

"Born the seventh hour, too. My mum wasn't happy. She's always complained I kept her up all night before I deigned to be born. I used to feel guilty about that. I think I've decided to get over it now." He smiled ruefully. "So how long have you been here, Potter?"

"Since Friday. The Dursleys have gone on a cruise. During the day I've been at work, though."

"Work?" Malfoy looked oddly interested. Harry would have expected him to feel that work was beneath him.

"Yeah, you know. The manual labor you think is so demeaning."

Malfoy grimaced. "Who cares about demeaning at this point? I'm broke, Potter. I need some money. Even Muggle money. I could always exchange it at Gringott's."

"Are you saying you want me to help you get a job?"

"Well, the cat's out of the bag now, isn't it? I know you're here, you know I'm here. And we got off track. There are a few questions we haven't been asking ourselves, such as, why has that old bat been making me stay in this room morning, noon and night since the end of term? Why didn't she tell you I was here, and why didn't she tell me you were here? What's the point? And what's the point of not telling you she's a witch?"

"Well, I reckon the point when I was younger was that Dumbledore didn't want my head turned. Because of the whole--you know--"

Malfoy nodded. "Right. The same thing. And she watched over you, I reckon. Made sure you were all right."

"I guess so. She could have been a bit pleasanter about it. I suppose it was her cover, but still..."

"So are you telling me that she's lived in this house for years? In the Muggle world?" He still looked like he couldn't quite believe it.

"Right. I used to see her every day when I was walking to school. She used to be carrying this basket with a couple of her cats in it..." Suddenly Harry had a memory flash; he was walking to school, small thin frame bending under the weight of his schoolbooks in his rucksack, and she was

always about thirty feet behind, it seemed, also walking into the village, and always looking remarkably unperturbed when Dudley and his gang came upon him and started roughing him up. He'd never felt particularly protected while walking to school, considering that she ignored the bullies. But now, he realized, she had been protecting him from a threat of a different sort.

"Did you say *cats*?" Malfoy said nervously, putting his head round the door jamb, looking into the upstairs hall with trepidation.

"Yeah, Malfoy. Deadly little kitty cats with nasty sharp claws and killer purrs." Harry shook his head over him. "It's one thing to not be a cat person, it's another to be *afraid* of cats. They're not that big or anything. They're actually quite nice. Oddly enough, they don't seem to like *her* very much, but I can't say that I blame them."

He came back into the room. "Doesn't matter." He surveyed Harry now, taking in his clothes. "What were you going to do today?"

"Work in my aunt's garden. I told Mrs. Figg I'd promised to do that, but not go to church. Speaking of which--" he checked his watch; it was only eleven. "Good. She probably won't be back until one. The service should be about an hour, then some socializing with the other church ladies, then she'll have to walk back from the village."

"Did you say *church*? She goes to church?"

"Well, it would be strange if she didn't, around here. At her age. My aunt and uncle only ever went and took us at Christmas and Easter, but all the old women around here are regulars. Everyone would probably wonder why she didn't if she didn't. I suppose it's been part of her cover."

Malfoy shook his head in disbelief again. "I can't believe I'm spending the summer in the same house with *you*."

"*You* can't believe it? At least you knew she was a witch!" And then suddenly, he remembered seeing the ink and parchment and quills in her desk...And then there were the pages of the books in the living room...*He* hadn't changed them, he realized now, *she* had. He hit his head with his hand. Malfoy stared at him. "What?"

"Oh--nothing. Just feeling like stupid prat for not figuring it out before."

"Yeah, well don't let me stop you if you're feeling stupid. Go right ahead."

"Thanks loads, Malfoy."

"Any time."

They looked at each other a bit awkwardly, the radio blaring still. Harry stepped over to it and switched it off. "Well, there's not much point to you staying up here anymore, is there? You might as well come downstairs. I think we need to talk to Mrs. Figg when she gets back. I can work in Aunt Petunia's garden some other time."

Malfoy nodded, following Harry down the stairs and into the living room. Mrs. Figg had apparently already given Malfoy some breakfast in his room. At least she's not letting him starve, Harry thought. But why keep us separate? Why keep me in the dark about her being a witch?

They hung about in the living room, waiting for her to return. The grey cat curled up on Harry again (he was mentally calling this one the lap cat). Malfoy looked disturbed about the black cat until he saw that it wasn't going to try to sit on him. They watched bits of television programs for a maximum of thirty seconds each. Harry let Malfoy hold the remote control; he was fascinated, changing the station almost as soon as Harry could start to figure out what each program or advertisement was...Malfoy had a new toy, he realized. He'd never seen a television before.

This took up a surprising amount of time, and before they knew it, the front door was opening and they heard her step in the hall. The grey cat leapt down from Harry's lap and hid behind the chair where he'd been sitting. Harry put his finger to his lips and crept behind the arm chair himself.

"Draco!" she called up the stairs. "I'm back!"

"In here," he drawled just loud enough to be heard through the door. She opened the door to the living room and entered quickly.

"Draco! What are you doing down here? Were you watching the television? Could the neighbors have heard? I was going to let you come down for a while for your birthday, but now I think I've changed my mind! Get back upstairs this instant!"

"Why should I? So I can spend my sixteenth birthday cooped up too? What's the point?"

"The point is to keep you safe. What other people don't know, they can't divulge to dark wizards who put Imperius on them."

"If that's your worry," Harry said, standing up and letting her see him, "I can put it to rest as far as I'm concerned. I'm rather good at resisting Imperius, not to brag..."

"H-H-Harry! I--I told you to stay away until later..."

"Hello there, Arabella Figg. That is your real name, isn't it?" He frowned at her with his arms crossed. Quite suddenly, she really looked her age, and quite addled and flustered, too. He refused to let her intimidate him ever again. He knew her secret now.

Her mouth worked but no sound came out. She sank into a chair, looking defeated. Then she said softly, "Oh, Albus won't be happy..."

"This is because of Dumbledore?" Malfoy practically squeaked, getting to his feet.

"Oh hush up, Draco!" she snapped at him, sounding more like her old self. "And sit down, the pair of you. It's long and complicated..."

So Harry sat, and she told the two of them about the job Dumbledore had entrusted to her: to watch over them, two of the three people in the prophecy. First, she'd managed to get the nanny job at Malfoy Manor when Draco was a baby (she'd been in Slytherin when she was in school; somehow, Harry was not surprised). At the same time, she'd established residency in Little Whinging, with Dumbledore's help, and she'd gone round to the Dursleys to offer her services as a baby-sitter, so cheaply that it of course appealed to them. She wasn't called upon to baby-sit for Harry terribly often, which was a good thing as she needed to spend a great deal of time Apparating back and forth between her Surrey house and Malfoy Manor. There was the matter of establishing herself as part of the Little Whinging community, being seen at St. Bede's every Sunday, and, not least, gossiping with the neighbors. It was hard work to do that at the same time as working as a nanny for such demanding employers as the Malfoys. They spent almost no time with their son.

Then, when the Dursleys did hire her to baby-sit Harry, she sometimes needed to take care of both boys at the same time. She would tell the Malfoys that she was going to take Draco to her sister's house; they were fine with this. If they wanted him underfoot all the time, they wouldn't have hired a nanny. She would strap him to her and fly on her broomstick at night to Surrey. After Harry and Draco had played together all day, she had put very subtle memory charms on them, so they wouldn't remember anything but seeing her. This was starting to get more complicated when they were four or so; they were far more self-aware at this point, and she dreaded one of them saying something to their families about the other boy they'd been playing with.

"We *played* together?" Malfoy said incredulously.

"You were best mates. Not that you remembered from one time to the next. Memory charms. Important precaution. But you know how small children are; they meet each other, and they seem to think, *Right. I'm four and you're four, I'm a boy and you're a boy, so let's be friends for life...*"

"Friends for life?" Harry choked out.

"Oh, you know what I mean. Children at that age are completely indiscriminate."

"Good word for it," Malfoy grumbled, glaring at Harry as though it were *his* fault Malfoy didn't remember any of this.

"Could you--" Harry started, then paused, uncertain.

"What?" she said sharply to him.

"Well--would it be possible at this point to somehow lift the memory charms? To let us remember? There's no point now, surely, to having us block those memories." Even if they included Malfoy, he thought it might be nice to have some *pleasant* childhood memories.

She grimaced. "It's not an easy thing. I'll look it up and get back to you."

"In the meantime," Malfoy broke in, "I'd like to live a life outside of that ruddy room now, please. Now that I don't have to hide from Potter."

"Malfoy has a point," Harry conceded.

"It wasn't just Harry I didn't want to know about you. And is that what you always call each other? Potter and Malfoy?"

They looked at each other and shrugged. "We always have done," Harry said feebly.

"No you haven't. You used to call each other Harry and Draco. Never mind. It'll come back to you if I can remember what I did with that book on memory charms..." Suddenly this made Harry laugh, and in a moment Malfoy caught on and also laughed. Mrs. Figg looked bewildered. "What? What's so funny?"

"You need a remembering charm to help you find the book on memory charms!" Harry crowed delightedly, still laughing. Slowly, she cracked a smile and then joined them in their laughter. Harry realized he'd never seen her laugh before (jeering at people on television didn't count, he felt). He felt like he would never stop. Malfoy held his middle, doubling over helplessly. Just when Harry thought his life couldn't get any stranger, it did...

* * * * *

That evening had a small sixteenth-birthday party for Draco Malfoy. Harry had managed to convince Mrs. Figg to get Indian take-away, and they had a nice curry and some violently-red tandoori chicken. It turned out that

the moussaka Harry had enjoyed when he was younger had come from the Greek take-away establishment that had preceded the Indian business in the same location. Mrs. Figg confessed that she couldn't cook to save her life. This was hardly news to the boys.

They'd also talked about the changes there could be in life at Mrs. Figg's house, now that there weren't any secrets about who was staying there any more. Harry was going to phone Hermione, tell her all about Mrs. Figg being Malfoy's nanny, and ask her to send Hedwig back. He was also going to ask permission to talk to Hermione on the phone occasionally, something he never would have dared ask Mrs. Figg before. It turned out that he couldn't use Mrs. Figg's fireplace to talk to Ron, however, because her fireplaces had been taken off the Floo network as a security precaution, as had the Weasleys' fireplaces. But with Hedwig, he could at least write to Ron now without having to rely on the regular post (he didn't think the British postal system knew where the Burrow was anyway). And he graciously told Malfoy he could use Hedwig to write to Ginny. Mrs. Figg still looked nervous while they discussed these things, and mumbled something about talking to Dumbledore.

After the meal, Mrs. Figg poured herself a glass of brandy and offered some to the boys. Harry declined, remembering the watered-down whiskey Snape had given him; that had been bad enough, despite how weak it was. Malfoy accepted, but then, it was his birthday, Harry rationalized (and he remembered the hip flask he'd carried at the ceilidh).

She asked them how school was going, and they each told their versions of it, interrupting and contradicting each other until she shut them up with, "Enough! Quiet already! I've had enough of you sniping at each other. I changed your nappies, the pair of you! And when you were wee lads, you got on famously! I don't want to hear one more angry word from you!" She, apparently, still had that privilege.

Malfoy made a face. "Did you have to mention nappies...?"

Harry found himself agreeing about this. He was ready to make a concession. "He did finally thank me for the Quidditch Cup."

"And Potter thanked me for the House Cup," Malfoy said grudgingly.

She sighed. "Perhaps I shouldn't have put those memory charms on you. Perhaps it would have been better these past five years for you to remember that you were once friends...Wait a minute..."

She went to her desk against the wall between the dining room and kitchen; opening a deep lower drawer, she withdrew a large photo album and put it on the table so they could all see it. She opened it in the middle, then turned several pages, before she found what she was looking for.

"There. Look at that and tell me you don't look like best mates there."

It was a picture of two small, thin boys at the seaside. There were brightly-striped cabanas behind them, and their black and blond hair fluttered in the sea breeze. They were next to a large sand castle they'd apparently built together, a confused pile of dun-colored towers and steps and slightly-crooked walls. Each boy had his arm around the other's shoulders, each was holding a pail with a shovel in his free hand, squinting against the sun while gulls wheeled in the painfully blue sky. Harry felt like he could almost hear the crashing waves, and although he had never thought he had been to the seaside at any time in his life, he almost felt the memories coming back, almost felt like he could smell the salty sea...

Malfoy was turning the pages, finding more pictures of the two of them. They looked like the best of friends, all right. Both of their faces were much rounder in the pictures; they hadn't yet lost their baby fat. They were also both painfully pale. Harry's eyes looked very green; they weren't obscured by his glasses yet. It was so strange, looking at the photos, events he didn't know he'd experienced laid out before him, a part of his childhood he'd never suspected.

"Of course, when Draco was old enough for tutors, Lucius Malfoy fired me. Dumbledore didn't see that coming; he'd thought I'd be able to watch over him and keep him from being a pawn of his father's..." Mrs. Figg looked regretfully at Malfoy. "I did try, Draco. We tried. We never wanted you to--"

"To get this?" he asked, quietly pulling back his sleeve, showing the Mark on his arm. He covered it up again and she nodded.

"And once I wasn't able to influence your upbringing, it seemed even luckier that we kept you from remembering Harry. I always thought Albus knew best...That was another reason I thought you two shouldn't know you were in the same house. I reckoned you'd be trying to kill each other. Even though my brother wrote to me and said you were perhaps starting to get along. I just wish I could have talked to him on the day of the ceilidh." Harry remembered that "Arabella" had been the operative disguised as Ian Lucas' wife Mary (using Polyjuice Potion). He looked uncertainly at Malfoy, who still did not know the extent of Dumbledore's underground operation. Harry still didn't know the full extent of the operation. "I'm just glad he saw those Death Eaters through the pub wall and--"

"What?" Harry interrupted her. She gazed back at him.

"What's wrong?"

"You said your brother saw Death Eaters through the wall. Mad Eye Moody is your *brother*?"

Malfoy's jaw dropped. "I just cannot get away from that family..."

She nodded. "Aye. Alastor's my brother." Then she chuckled, looking for a moment, Harry thought, like the worst Muggle stereotype of a wicked old witch. "Who do you think first gave him the name 'Mad Eye?' Isn't that what evil little sisters are for?"

Harry shook his head, incredulous. Mrs. Figg took another drink of the brandy, moving it around her mouth slowly before swallowing and looking into the distance thoughtfully.

"Half-brother, he is, actually. Our dad was Cameron Moody. Lived in Edinburgh. He fell in love with a married woman, and a Muggle, no less. She was twice his age, if you can believe it. Oh, dad was a charmer. She never got a divorce; when they learned she was pregnant, they ran off together to the Isle of Skye. There Alastor was born on New Year's Day, 1897. Almost a hundred years ago, now. She was already almost forty, and they didn't have any more babies; none that lived, at any rate.

Alastor's never said precisely, just hinted that they tried to have more and couldn't manage it. To all intents and purposes, Morag Fraser lived as dad's wife, even called herself Morag Moody. When Alastor was a few years old, they moved to a village in Yorkshire with a small wizarding community, hidden from the surrounding Muggles. They told everyone they were married. Alastor lived there until he went to Hogwarts. And then..."

"What?"

"He went to Hogwarts with *her*."

Harry and Malfoy looked at each other, perplexed. "Who?" Malfoy demanded.

"Cathy Marvolo."

"Oh," Harry said, swallowing. From the name 'Marvolo' he assumed he knew who she was.

"Who?" Malfoy said again.

"Tom Riddle's mother," Harry informed him. Mrs. Figg didn't correct him, so he knew he was right. Malfoy still looked blank. "Tom Marvolo Riddle was Voldemort's real name." Malfoy's eyes opened wide. Mrs. Figg continued.

"He was in love with her, in fact. But Cathy had met this Muggle in her village, Little Hangleton. After she finished at Hogwarts, she spent years pursuing him, but never told him she was a witch. They married in 1926, and in 1927, *he* was born. I was born the same year, was in the same year at Hogwarts with him. With Voldemort."

Malfoy swallowed; now *she* had said the name. Harry remembered Malfoy saying the name in wizard court, and wondered how difficult that had been for him. "But," Malfoy said in a musing voice, "wasn't your mum almost seventy by then? And a Muggle?"

"I told you; Alastor and I are half-siblings. His mum died in 1924. She was in her sixties. Perfectly normal Muggle life span for those times. I'm not sure of the cause of death. Dad mourned her a couple of years, then met a witch named Amelia Chesterton--my mum--and married her and they had me. Alastor was a bit scandalized, he told me when I was almost done Hogwarts. My mum was five years younger than him! And Dad expected *him* to call her mum, too! Which he never did; Alastor called her Amelia, and that was fine with her..."

"So," Harry said breathlessly, "you were in school with Voldemort. Tom Riddle, I mean. And Hagrid. And you--did you know Myrtle? Before she was killed? Do you remember when the Chamber of Secrets was opened?"

Mrs. Figg waved her hand at him. "Stop, stop. I don't have the strength tonight. All in good time. Yes, I remember all that. Let's leave that for some other time, shall we? You have work tomorrow, and I need my beauty sleep." She actually cracked a smile, and Harry could see a slight resemblance then, between her and her brother. Not the way Moody was now, but the way he remembered him from Dumbledore's Pensieve. And she and her brother had both been in Slytherin, Moody at the same time as the witch who was at that time the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin, and who became Tom Riddle's mother, and Mrs. Figg with Tom Riddle himself...

* * * * *

Harry hadn't exactly been prepared to give Malfoy a birthday gift of any kind, so he said he'd vouch for him to Trevor, if he really wanted a job. Mrs. Figg had looked nervous about allowing this, but she didn't say anything. So it was that Draco Malfoy accompanied him to seven Magnolia Crescent in the morning. Trevor looked suspiciously at Malfoy when Harry showed up with the pale blond boy. He pulled a phone out of his back pocket and punched the small buttons quickly.

"Oi, Dick! Trev 'ere. It's our 'Arry, it is. Brought a mate round, lookin' for work. Dunno. Lessee..." He nodded at Malfoy. "You there. What you call y'self?"

He hesitated for a second. "Draco Malfoy."

Trevor said the name into the small phone. Malfoy leaned over to Harry and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "*What is he talking to?*"

"A phone. Surely you've heard of telephones."

"I thought they had curly cords, and were attached to walls in houses..."

"Not anymore. Well, people still have those, too. But they have these also now."

Malfoy frowned, staring at Trevor listening to Dick. Dick seemed to be talking quite a lot. Trevor was grunting every few seconds and nodding. (Harry had seen his aunt and uncle doing this, nodding while on the phone. It seemed pointless, and yet it also seemed to be something that humans could not help doing.) It was strange for Harry, not seeing Dick. In the previous year he'd become so accustomed to seeing Sirius, for instance, when he called him from Snape's office. Of course, you couldn't very well carry a fireplace in your back pocket...

"Right," Trevor said suddenly into the phone after not talking for quite a while. Both Harry and Malfoy had been shifting their feet restlessly, waiting for the verdict.

Trevor folded up the phone and put it back in his pocket. "'Ere's 'ow it is. Dick knows I don' much like trainin' anyone new. No offense, kid, that's just me. 'E's the one 'oo trained up our 'Arry proper, las' summer. So we're going to switch off. I'll be supervisin' the job over in New Stokington, an' Dick'll be the boss 'ere. 'E should show up soon. Mebbe you can get 'im started, eh?" he said to Harry.

Harry nodded and gestured for Malfoy to follow him, to get gloves and tools. Malfoy was more than a little awkward. His arms were thin and singularly unmuscular. He had a scholar's pallor and looked more likely to burn and become lobster red than to tan. But Harry soon found that if there was one thing Malfoy had in abundance, it was determination. Harry watched him digging, sweat dripping off his brow, a scowl on his face as he put his foot on the spade, willing it to cut through the hard soil, gritting his teeth as he worked. Malfoy engaged in manual labor, Harry thought. Now I've seen everything.

Finally, Dick's dirty blue Renault pulled into the Galbraiths' drive. Harry stood up from where he'd been patting soil around the roots of a rubber plant. He smiled and waved at Dick, who nodded at him, turning to Trevor, who was waiting to talk to him. Dick was as brown as ever, with the same snapping blue eyes, the white hair brushed back from his brow, the deep smile lines around his mouth and eyes.

When he was done with Trevor, he strode over to Harry, his hand out. "Good to see you again, Harry." After grasping his hand he turned to Draco Malfoy, who started to put his hand out too, then froze. He stared in clear disbelief at the older man.

"You!" was all he could say, his mouth hanging open.

Harry frowned at him. Malfoy thought he knew *Dick*. But Dick was smiling and nodding at Malfoy, grasping his hand.

"Hello again, Draco."

He *did* know Malfoy, Harry thought in amazement. But how--?

Then Harry leaned in, peering at the deeply tanned face and twinkling blue eyes, mentally superimposing facial hair on the clean-shaven face, lengthening the hair, adding half-moon spectacles...

Harry's eyes suddenly opened wide, and his voice caught as he said the word softly, still unsure, not completely convinced he wasn't insane.

"*Aberforth?*"

Chapter Two

In Dreams

"*Aberforth?*"

The older man smiled broadly at Harry, his blue eyes crinkling at the edges. "Yes, Harry. I kept waiting for you to notice something when I was teaching you..."

"But--but it never occurred to me...I thought Dick--you, I mean--was--I mean were--a Muggle." Harry felt as though he'd forgotten how to speak English. He glanced over at Nigel and Sam, on hands and knees in the front garden. They didn't seem to be listening. Trevor had gone to his car; he would be driving to the other job in New Stokington now. Harry knew he'd see him later, when he'd have to come back to give his brother a ride home.

Malfoy looked very smug. "You didn't figure it out the first time you had Charms with him, Potter?"

Harry glared at Malfoy. He'd never figured out that Mrs. Figg was a witch, either. I'm *very* observant, Harry thought wryly. He wasn't feeling especially brilliant. I'll just tell Hermione she should find a boyfriend who's *not* slightly less intelligent than, say, this rubber plant...

"Moody said you lived in the Muggle world because you had a, er, 'philosophical problem,'" Harry said softly. Aberforth--no, Dick--no, Aberforth smiled at him again. Harry's head was whirling.

"Actually, what happened was I fell in love."

Malfoy's mouth was working; he had a mischievous glint in his eye. "Was it a goat by any chance?" he asked, clearly unable to resist.

Aberforth laughed loudly, making Sam and Nigel look in their direction. "No, a very human, very Muggle woman...who is now, sadly, my late wife these past fifteen years..." Malfoy had the good grace to flush and utter a soft apology. "That's all right. You didn't know. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of living in the wizarding world, so we didn't. I reserved magic for emergencies, and in part to honor her memory and in part because I've just become accustomed to living this way, I still live in the Muggle world mostly and seldom use magic. I don't really miss it. I have a good life, I get to relax for months at a time when the weather is poor, and when it's not, I'm privileged to work in the great outdoors making things grow. Even things that shouldn't, in England. I confess that I do use magic to get a slight leg up on some other landscapers. I'm the only bloke in the British Isles who can get all types of tropical plants to thrive here, for instance, even in the winter." His blue eyes twinkled at them.

Harry felt like he had a million questions for him, but Aberforth cut him off. "Well, now you know, Harry. We should get to work, don't you think? I'll take you, Draco. You can help me near the drive, putting in the new edging. By the way, to Nigel and Trevor, I'm Dick Abernathy, owner of Abernathy Landscaping. Call me Dick, not Aberforth."

Now Harry felt his powers of observation coming back to him. "You said 'to Nigel and Trevor.' What about Sam?"

His eyes were twinkling again. "Do you think I would have let you work over here with no magical protection, Harry? Sam's a wizard. He knows all about who the pair of you are, of course."

"Sam's a *what?*" Harry started to be somewhat loud, then muted himself.

"Yes. He's had some trouble holding down a job since he got out of Azkaban five years ago, so Albus sent him to me four years ago and he's been working for me ever since."

"Azkaban!"

"It's a long story. Yes, he was sent to Azkaban for ten years because he did actually break wizarding law. No, he's not a dark wizard. And, of course, it wasn't an Unforgivable Curse, else he'd have had a life sentence. He's still a bit tetchy about the whole thing. If he wants to tell

you, he will. Until he does, keep your noses out of it." Suddenly he sounded as stern as his brother could be, at times. "Time as we got to work," he said then, sounding more like Dick again. Harry realized suddenly that *Aberforth* had a different accent than *Dick*. He felt so confused...

The boys both nodded. Then Aberforth led Malfoy to the drive, while Harry got back to work on the rubber plants. Every so often Harry glanced at Sam. Once, Sam lifted his head and met his eyes and nodded almost imperceptibly before going back to his work.

They ate lunch in the Galbraiths' kitchen without Aberforth ("Dick," Harry tried to remind himself), who had to drive to New Stokington to settle a problem with a lorry driver delivering fertilizer. When they were sunning themselves in the rear garden afterwards, as usual, Malfoy gamely stretched out shirtless like the others, and Harry had to try not to laugh at the teasing he received from Nigel for his pallor, remembering the previous summer when the same thing had happened to him. But then Sam noticed the bruises, and the Dark Mark.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at the Mark. Harry watched his face; he genuinely didn't know. Harry remembered Sirius being mystified as to why Karkaroff had been trying to show Snape something on his arm, when Harry was in fourth year. Clearly the fact that Death Eaters carried the Dark Mark wasn't common knowledge, even among those in the wizarding world who had been in Azkaban (perhaps even among those who'd seen that terrifying Mark in the sky). *Azkaban*, Harry thought again. He shuddered to think of Sam having to live day in and day out, reliving the worst moments in his life, thanks to the dementors.

Harry heard a car and looked up; Aberforth was returning from New Stokington. He exited the car and slammed the door carefully; Harry thought it was possible that the car might shudder to pieces if this were done wrong. He strode over to them as Malfoy and Sam continued their conversation.

Malfoy looked down at his arm and mumbled, "Oh, it's nothing. It was kind of a dare..." Sam nodded, but looked unconvinced. He had to know that it was the Dark Mark, Harry thought, even if he didn't know that Voldemort could use it to summon the Death Eaters. For some reason it had never occurred to him before that this meant Malfoy had a connection to Voldemort too. Harry wondered what would happen if the Death Eaters were summoned. He'd probably start clutching his scar, and Malfoy would start clutching his arm, and Nigel would think the pair of them were barking mad.

Malfoy then started asking Sam about his various tattoos. Intricately detailed work on his lower legs made it appear that he was wearing chain mail leggings. Celtic braids adorned his upper arms, and a rampant lion

that looked remarkably like the Gryffindor lion was across his stomach and chest. The name *Vera* was written in ornate script on his left forearm. A large eagle with its head turned and wings spread adorned his back. Malfoy admired this the most.

"I've been thinking of getting a dragon," he said to Sam. "Or I had been. I'm broke."

"Well, save up your money and in a few weeks if you like I can take you to my bloke. He does beautiful work. Could hide those bruises, for instance..." Malfoy looked at his arms, frowning; Harry could tell that the magical bruises were a great source of annoyance to him. He remembered Malfoy showing them to the jury at his father's trial...

"Sam," Aberforth cautioned, sitting on an upturned pail and sipping some coffee from a paper cup, "Draco just turned sixteen, and you are proposing taking him to get tattoos..."

"Well, are his parents likely to complain?" Aberforth was silent, his mouth drawn into a line. "As I thought. I say if he wants to get a tattoo, he should get a tattoo. He's got one already, so he knows the needles don't hardly hurt." Malfoy's eyes opened wide.

"Erm, I hadn't really decided yet..."

Nigel laughed, and so did Sam. "I'm just messing with you, Draco." Malfoy smiled feebly and went back to sunning himself, still looking a little nervous about the prospect of getting tattooed. Harry remembered Christmas night on the cliffs at Dover...

That was the last day they worked with Nigel; Aberforth transferred him to the New Stokington job, so now, unbeknownst to the Galbraiths, there were four wizards working on their landscaping. Harry usually toiled alongside Sam, while Aberforth was taking Malfoy in hand. He was surprisingly docile about learning his new trade, nodding at everything "Dick" told him and gamely trying to move plants and stones that were far too heavy for him. Once when Aberforth had gone to his car for some paperwork, Malfoy had been struggling to move a large, heavy sack of soil, and Sam was busy putting a tree in place in the front garden. Harry rose from where he was digging holes for flower bulbs and hoisted the bag on his shoulder for the thin, blond boy.

"Where were you trying to take this, Malfoy?" He pointed silently to a spot about ten feet away from where they stood. Harry walked to the spot and said, "Here?" Malfoy nodded and Harry set it down, then returned to his bulbs. Malfoy gave a perplexed look to the sack, then Harry.

"How come you can do that, Potter, and I can't?"

"Because I've been running just about every day for the last year. That's why I started, in fact. You're supposed to lift with your legs. That's why I wanted to make my legs stronger."

Malfoy looked thoughtful. "What time do you go running, in the morning?"

"At--wait a minute, Malfoy. You are *not* going to come running with me."

"Why not? It'd be safer. You wouldn't be alone."

"Yeah, you're going to watch my back. Sure, Malfoy."

"Listen, you--"

"I don't want to go running with you, and that's that."

Malfoy made a face, then started ripping open the sack of soil, using a scoop to distribute it into a series of metal pails in order to add nutrients in precise amounts that would create soils of differing pH levels for various plants. Harry could see how this might appeal to Malfoy; it was not unlike Potions.

"Fine," he spat. "So much for being mates when we were kids..."

Harry felt a pang of guilt, then shook himself. I am not going to let myself be manipulated by *Malfoy*, he said to himself. He thought again about running with Malfoy, and recoiled from the idea. He just couldn't stomach it. But why precisely? He'd gone running with Dudley, the previous summer, and it had been something that had helped them to become friends. He tried to picture running with the other boy, heading toward the village, stopping at the graveyard--

There. That was it. "Malfoy," he said levelly. "It's just that--when I go running in the morning, I stop by Dudley's grave and my parents' graves. I doubt you want to do that."

Malfoy shrugged. "I could rest and wait, couldn't I?"

Harry swallowed. "I suppose so..."

So Malfoy started running with him in the mornings, leaning against the stone gateposts at the graveyard entrance while he waited for Harry. They ran silently, both focused on the path ahead. After a few weeks of sun and running, Malfoy was starting to look fit and strong and Harry found himself frowning when he saw the changes in him. *Ginny will likely drop her jaw when she sees him*, he thought. The idea didn't thrill him.

On the Saturday before his birthday, Harry and Sam were toiling side by side in the rear garden, neither one saying a word. When they had

finished digging their hole to the specified size, they put their spades away and Sam sat down on a large rock. Malfoy and Aberforth were in the front garden. Sam pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Harry sat on the ground watching him. Sam didn't look at Harry, but at some point in the distance. He blew smoke, and Harry tried to cough as discreetly as possible when some crept in his nose, not to seem to be criticizing. Not that Sam took any notice of him. Or so he thought.

"I should probably quit. I started when I was fourteen," Sam explained, and Harry realized he was talking about the cigarettes. "I was Muggle-born. My best mates at home had all started by then, so I did too, to fit in. Being a wizard and away at school much of the year, I wanted to fit in anyway I could. I never told one of them that I was a wizard."

Harry was silent, watching the smoke wafting up from Sam's cigarette, wondering what he would do if he'd actually made friends with any of the other children in Little Whinging when he was younger, if he'd still been friends with them after his eleventh birthday. Would he have told them he was a wizard? Would he even be permitted to? He didn't know. Silence hung between him and Sam again.

"You want to know what I did, don't you?" Sam said suddenly, standing and grinding the cigarette stub under his heel. He bent down and picked up the expired fragment of paper and tobacco leaves, then flicked it into his cold coffee, sitting on an upturned pail ever since the morning. Harry watched silently, his voice caught in his throat. He nodded dumbly, wondering what he would hear. Sam sat again and looked at Harry as though judging whether he thought he could handle it.

"Aberforth said--"

"Dick," Sam said quickly, interrupting him. "Call him Dick. Don't forget again."

"Um. Dick said you'd been in Azkab---I mean, in prison for ten years."

Sam looked at that distant point again. "Yep."

"And you got out five years ago."

Again, "Yep."

"So--" Harry thought quickly, "you went into prison fifteen years ago."

"Right."

Harry swallowed. His parents had died fifteen years earlier. Sirius had gone to prison fifteen years earlier. "Did you know Sirius Black, in prison?"

Sam shook his head. "Black was a lifer. I didn't do an Unforgivable Curse. I was with the others, the ones who had finite sentences. The lifers were all in solitary. We were four blokes to a cell ten feet square. Not exactly spacious. At times I considered killing one of my cell mates so I could get a life sentence. At least then I'd've had enough room to breathe. But I never did it, of course. I'd already been responsible for one person dying...and the dementors take it out of you, besides. You get to the point where you can feel all of your cell mates' anguish and despair inside your head, too..."

"What--what happened?" Harry could barely speak.

"You mean what did I do to get sent to prison?" Harry nodded. Sam drew his lips into a line. "Because of me, someone died. It was accidental. I wasn't trying to kill, but it was still my fault..."

"Accidental? And you still had to go to prison?"

"Accidental or not, a person was still dead. The spell I cast was to blame. It wasn't the killing curse, but it still killed. That was all that mattered."

"What was it?"

Sam sighed. "The Disarming Charm. I put too much into it, I suppose. I was all worked up. If you're not careful, you can really send someone flying with that. They can really get hurt. Or die."

"But--but if you were disarming someone, wasn't it self-defense?"

Sam shrugged. "I suppose I could have claimed self-defense. Didn't feel like it."

"What? You didn't *feel* like it? Didn't you have a trial?"

"Nah. No need."

"No need?" Harry echoed him again. "Why?"

"Because I confessed. If the Ministry has a signed confession, they don't need to have a trial."

"But why--"

"Harry." Harry stopped sputtering and stared at Sam, who looked sadder than anyone he'd ever seen. "Harry," he said again. "It was my wife. I killed my wife. I loved her very much. I still do. Please--let's get back to work."

Harry decided that Sam must be older than he had originally thought, if he'd had a wife fifteen years earlier. Harry had thought he was in his early thirties, but it was probably closer to late thirties or early forties. He noticed now the small curling grey hairs mixed in with the auburn hair around his temples. *I killed my wife.* But if he'd had to disarm her--was she a Death Eater? Harry wondered. Aberforth had said Sam wasn't a dark wizard (and he'd trusted him to look out for Harry), but what if his wife had been involved in the Dark Arts? Harry couldn't begin to imagine how awful that would be, to find that someone so close to you had gone over to the other side...

Harry thought of the "Vera" tattoo on Sam's arm. Was that his wife's name? he wondered. He dared not ask now. They returned to their work, all business now, and it was as though they'd never had the conversation about Azkaban and his killing his wife.

Then, the day before his birthday, Harry was sunning himself in the rear garden after lunch when his scar started hurting again; behind his eyelids, he saw Voldemort and his heir, side by side; he could only see their backs, but somehow, he knew it was them. Their wands were trained on a lion. It was in a cage, and they were in a wood. Then Harry saw Wormtail nearby; the bands of light that connected their wands with the lion leapt and crackled, and the animal writhed in agony and roared its pain. When it finally stopped, the great beast sagged to the bottom of the cage, looking dejected and like death would be welcome.

"How like Harry Potter to become a lion Animagus," Wormtail's voice cut through Harry's brain. "The symbol of Gryffindor."

"If I recall correctly, Wormtail," he now heard Voldemort's cold voice, "you went running through the forest to get away from him...it was not altogether an ill-considered choice. An Animagus...this makes things very interesting...very interesting indeed..."

The images were fading; Harry thought about the poor lion they'd captured to torture for sport. He convulsively clutched the basilisk amulet that Ginny had given him, trying to calm down. He winced; his scar throbbed slightly, so that he was aware of it, but he didn't feel agonized any more. It reminded him of when he sometimes put his fingers to the side of his throat after running, checking his pulse, being very aware of the rhythm of his own heart, the blood pumping through his body. It was like the scar had become another organ with its own pulsing rhythm, like his heart and lungs. He relaxed his hand so that it was merely covering the amulet, instead of clutching it. Why do I have a scar? he wondered. Why didn't Dumbledore heal it when I was a baby? What is it *for*?

This train of thought was derailed by voices nearby; he easily identified them as Sam and Malfoy. He could smell Sam's cigarette and he heard Malfoy grunting as he did some sort of exercise. Sit-ups, by the sound of

it, he decided. Malfoy had become compulsive about this and was gradually defining his upper body.

"How much is it, anyway?"

They must have been talking already while Harry was suffering from the scar-pain.

"Decided you want to after all?"

"Maybe."

"Well--seeing as how you just had a birthday and didn't get a damn thing, I could call it a birthday present. It's on me."

"Um, will Dick get hacked off at you? Remember when he first heard about it? I wouldn't want to get you in trouble."

Sam laughed. "Are you sure you're Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"If I could deny it, believe me, I would. I've been called a bastard plenty in my life, but now I wish it were literally true."

Sam exhaled noisily, and Harry had a hard time continuing to pretend to be asleep when some smoke wafted right up into his nose. "Well, I for one would never have expected to be sitting here with that monster's son. But then, I never would have expected his son to do what you did, either. I would have enjoyed seeing that, believe me. But Dick said I shouldn't go to the trial. I'd just want to get revenge, cause a ruckus, and wind up making him look like the victim and everyone'd get all sympathetic toward him. And I wasn't thrilled about the idea of seeing dementors again, anyway. So I stayed away..."

"Revenge? Revenge for what?"

Harry heard Sam pause and take a very audible drag on his cigarette. "Sure you want to know?"

Malfoy paused; Harry could hear him tapping his foot, a nervous habit of his. "Yeah," he said finally. Sam sighed.

"Fifteen years ago, your dad tried to recruit me to be a Death Eater. I worked with Harry's mum. We were both Aurors, frequently worked the same cases, although no Auror ever has a permanent partner. It's not like the Muggle police. For security they group and regroup all the time. You can get to the point where you don't notice someone you see all the time going bad; you don't want to believe it, you will yourself to be blind to it. This way, we all got used to working with each other, but not too used to

it, and there was less risk of fraternizing. The only married Aurors I ever knew of were the Longbottoms..."

"Longbottom! I go to school with a Longbottom! His parents were *Aurors*?" Harry was surprised; after Moody had revealed this in class, evidently the other Gryffindors had not spread the story around the school. They'd kept their council (even Lavender Brown, whom Harry probably held in the least regard of all his classmates).

"Neville. I know. Poor little bloke..."

"What--"

"That's for another time. We're getting sidetracked. At any rate, he really was after Lily Potter, your dad was, so he came after a few of us who worked with her. Three of my fellow Aurors were dead by the time he got around to me. But I didn't know that yet. We didn't know what had happened to any of them; one at a time, each just disappeared, and then their families were killed. One after another, whole families wiped out, day after day, seeing the Dark Mark in the sky..."

Draco Malfoy drew in his breath noisily. "And you?"

"He didn't come after me directly. I knew your dad from school; we were in the same year. During our seventh year, he was Quidditch captain for the Slytherin house team, and I was captain of the Gryffindor team. There was no love lost between the two of us. He put my wife under Imperius. She wasn't being recruited; she was a means to an end. I met Trina when she was a barmaid in a wizarding pub in Birmingham, where we lived. She wasn't ambitious; she just liked making people feel comfortable and at home. When this all happened, she hadn't even worked for a couple of years, since our daughter was born. Trina just adored her and didn't want to leave her side, so she quit her job. That's why I just didn't believe she was going to hurt our little girl..."

"What?" Malfoy's voice had an edge of alarm. Harry wondered whether either of them really wanted to hear this.

"See, that's what your dad told her to do. She was supposed to get me to agree, or she'd put Cruciatus on our daughter. Katie was only two years old! And I just stood there, while Trina talked to me in this strange voice. She didn't sound like herself at all. And even while she was saying the curse, somehow I *still* didn't believe she was serious. But the split second that I saw that Katie was in pain, I disarmed Trina. Trouble was, I didn't try to temper the spell; it was very strong. And I didn't pay attention to what was behind her..."

"What was behind her?"

Sam sighed. "Not much. That was the problem. Behind her were these French doors that opened onto a small balcony with some potted geraniums attached to the railing. We were living in a flat on the fourth floor of an old terrace house. And the basement flat had a walk-out brick-paved garden. Well, more brick than garden, really. There were potted plants round the edges. So it was as though we were on the *fifth* floor."

"When she went backwards, she smashed right through the French doors, they just went flying open. She tumbled over the balcony rail, taking a couple of the flowerpots with her. Landed in a heap on the bricks, five flights down. Broke her neck; died on impact." His voice had gotten very soft. Harry heard him grunt before standing. "And that," he said, still speaking very softly while audibly crushing out his cigarette, "is why Sam Bell went to prison for ten years."

Harry's eyes flew open and he quickly sat up. He gave up all pretense of being asleep. "Your name is Bell?" he exclaimed.

Sam and Malfoy whirled around, surprised. "Yeah," Sam confirmed.

"Are you--are you Katie Bell's dad?"

He looked very sad. "Yep. That's me."

"So--so when you go home every night, Katie's there."

"Well, not right now. She's in America, visiting cousins."

"But--but--"

Sam laughed. "Sometimes, Harry you still remind of that little bloke going out onto the Quidditch pitch at the age of eleven, looking just terrified at the idea of playing in your first match..."

"You were there?" Suddenly it occurred to Harry why Sam looked a bit familiar. Harry tried to picture him in the stands around the pitch, wearing wizarding robes. Sam nodded. "I've been to all of Katie's matches, ever since I got out when she was twelve. She became a Chaser, just like her old dad." His voice became very soft at the end of the sentence.

"You--you do know that one of the charges against Lucius Malfoy was putting Imperius on Katie, right?"

Even more quietly, "I know."

Of course, Harry thought, he'd claimed that Avery and Nott had done it, but still; they'd done it on his orders. So he'd been responsible for both Katie and her mum being under Imperius, and her mum had died because her dad was trying to disarm her.

Malfoy looked at Sam, then back at Harry. "That's enough for now, Harry," he said. "Lunch is over. Let's get back to work. Leave Sam alone."

Harry nodded and drew his lips into a line, picking up his shirt and pulling it on over his head, hiding the basilisk amulet as he pulled it down all the way. Malfoy pulled his own shirt on. Then, as he was turning to pick up his work gloves, he whirled on Malfoy. Frowning, he said, "*What* did you call me?"

Malfoy gave him a lopsided smile. "I know. But they're Sam and Dick. Sounds bloody stupid for us to be Malfoy and Potter. I'm not saying it's going to happen on a regular basis. I'm just trying it out."

Harry looked at him suspiciously. "I'm not sure I'll be calling you Draco anytime soon."

Malfoy shrugged. "You probably don't want me calling you what I think most of the time..."

"Why not?"

"Okay. Shithead, please hand me that trowel...aaah!" he screamed in mock-alarm as Harry, heaved Sam's newspaper at his head. In a minute, all three of them were laughing as they went back to work. But although Sam had laughed at the pair of them, Harry noticed, there was still an echo of sadness behind his eyes. He hadn't been with his daughter from the age of two to the age of twelve...

* * * *

After work, Harry walked back to Mrs. Figg's alone; Malfoy was having dinner with Sam. Aberforth had approved with a slight look of doubt around his eyes. When Harry closed the front door of Mrs. Figg's house, the orange-striped cat ("Grimalkin," it turned out) started rubbing against his legs. He moved slowly, so he wouldn't tread on the cat, and went to the hall table where the mail was placed. There were two parchments; one had "Harry" written on it in what looked like Hermione's hand, the other bore the legend "Draco" in what Harry assumed was Ginny's handwriting. With a grin, Harry grabbed the parchment with his name and sprinted up the stairs to the sewing room. He threw himself down on the sofa which doubled as his bed and unrolled the letter, scanning it quickly for the naughty bits (he could read the other parts later, he thought; he'd had a long day).

Not only weren't there any naughty bits, she was writing to tell him that she wouldn't be able to contact him for several days as Sirius was worried that someone might be watching the owls leaving from the Grangers' house; the phone was also out of the question in case Muggle phone-taps were being used. Sirius didn't want Death Eaters tracking Harry down by

following the owls or by using Muggle technology. Harry put the parchment down, frowning; she hadn't even mentioned his birthday. It wasn't every day he turned sixteen...

He tried to stop himself thinking this way; security was more important than his birthday. She'd written that Ron and Ginny weren't to send owls to Mrs. Figg's house during the next few days either. That was probably why Ginny sent Malfoy a letter today, he thought. He itched to go back down to the front hall and read what she'd written to him. Finally, he forced himself to stay put and closed his eyes for a brief nap before dinner...

But in no time, he was awake again; he'd dreamt of the heir's initiation once more. He went into the bathroom and took the after-work shower he'd neglected when he'd come back. Afterward he dressed and went down to eat dinner with Mrs. Figg. He didn't speak much; he felt more drained than rested when he dreamt of Voldemort. In the bathroom mirror he noted that he had dark circles under his eyes, noticeable despite his summer tan.

He chose to go to bed early instead of continuing to watch television with Mrs. Figg. Malfoy still wasn't back. Just over an hour after retiring, he woke up in a sweat; he'd had the dream again wherein Hermione turned into Ginny and he saw Snape telling his mother to say whatever was necessary to save herself and Harry, ending with the vision of Hogwarts in ruins and Ginny changing into a skeleton....He'd had this dream twice the night before, along with the dream about being on the roof with Dudley, and Dudley jumping....

Harry went to the bathroom to throw water on his face, then went back to bed. It was only ten o'clock. He tried reading his anthology, but he found himself reading the same line of text over and over, unable to concentrate. At ten-thirty he turned out the light to try again.

Right before midnight he was awake again. He checked the time, groaning. More bad dreams. He didn't get up or turn on the light; he tried to blank his mind, count sheep...

He watched the clock change from 11.59 to 12.00. It's my birthday, he thought. Whoopee. Happy birthday to me. Now if I could only get some sodding sleep...

Two o'clock. He'd actually been lying awake for two hours, trying desperately *not* to be awake. He tried counting backwards from one-thousand. The last number he remembered thinking was five-hundred fourteen...

Three o'clock. He'd woken from another nightmare, his scar throbbing again. Roll over; count backwards, softly sing the Hogwarts school song to

the tune of *Octopus' Garden*...picture Hermione emerging, dripping wet, from the tub in the prefects' bathroom...No, too stimulating...Moaning Myrtle, floating over her toilet...No, too likely to bring on more nightmares...

Four-o'clock. He'd dozed off again, only to awake with nightmares once more. Try to remember the ingredient list for Euphemos Potion, imagine Hermione reciting *Hogwarts, A History* from memory...

Five-o'clock. He'd been staring at the ceiling for an hour, and was finally feeling his eyelids drooping. I'm liable to have to sleep all through my birthday to make up for this night, he thought.

He awoke again just before dawn, trying not to remember the image he'd seen right before waking, an image it seemed he'd seen a hundred times now: the heir being initiated. He tried to feel happy in spite of his exhaustion. For the first time since his parents had died, he wasn't going to be spending his birthday with the Dursleys. It's my birthday, dammit, he thought. I've a right to be happy. He wasn't sure how much sleep he'd gotten during the night, but it couldn't have been more than three hours, if that.

He looked expectantly toward the window, wondering when the barrage of owls would begin, but then he remembered the moratorium on all communications. Great, he thought. No birthday presents. And I'll have to drop great, huge hints to Mrs. Figg, who *still* probably won't get it...

He stared at the ceiling, his hand wrapped around the basilisk amulet Ginny had given him for his fifteenth birthday. What would this year bring? he wondered. He felt like a completely different person from a year earlier. He couldn't help a smile creeping over his face as he thought of Hermione. Now I can picture her in the prefects' bathroom...

"Are you going to get up or just lie there with that stupid expression on your face?"

Malfoy stood in the doorway, dressed for running. He leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed and a smirk on his face. "Or should I leave so you can go on thinking of Granger and wank off..."

"How did you know I was thinking of Hermione?"

He snorted. "If you could see your face, you wouldn't ask that."

Harry hadn't realized he was so transparent. He threw back the sheet and pulled on the shorts and T-shirt he'd laid out on the chair that was pulled up to the sewing machine. (Did Mrs. Figg really sew with it? he wondered.) He noticed that Malfoy was wearing a long-sleeved sweatshirt with his shorts.

"Bit hot for that, isn't it?" In spite of the early hour, Harry could tell it was going to be a scorcher of a day. He was glad he wouldn't be working at the Galbraiths' in this heat. A whole day to do as I like, he thought, suddenly feeling bored. Sleep, he thought...if only I could sleep...

Malfoy merely shrugged. Harry tied his running shoes and rose, saying, "Let's go," to Malfoy as if he hadn't spent the entire night trying to exorcise Voldemort from his brain. When they returned, Mrs. Figg didn't mention his birthday. Before Malfoy went to work, he didn't mention Harry's birthday. Harry was starting to get more than a little depressed.

He was restless all day. He read a little, watched some chat shows, pulled weeds in Mrs. Figg's garden, irritated the grey cat ("Pyewacket") by playing with it with a string for too long; Mrs. Figg used a binding charm on his scratches.

He tried to sleep several times, each time waking from a bad dream. Near four in the afternoon he was lying on the sewing room sofa, staring at the ceiling again, thinking that compared to this, the birthdays he'd spent with the Dursley were a combination New Year's celebration and Royal Wedding. Some birthday, he thought...

He heard the front door slam. "I'm back!" came Malfoy's voice from the front hall. Who bloody cares, Harry thought.

"Harry!" Mrs. Figg's voice was raised. "Come downstairs! I need you in the kitchen."

Harry groaned, swinging his legs down and willing himself to stand. *Bloody hell, what now?* He trudged down the hall, down the stairs, down the entrance hall, which led to the back of the house, where the kitchen was...

"*Surprise!*"

He staggered backward in shock. Crunched into Mrs. Figg's kitchen was Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Sirius, Lupin, Aberforth, Sam, Moody and Malfoy. Harry knew his mouth was hanging open stupidly, but he couldn't seem to work the muscles that would pull it up where it belonged again. Then Sirius started singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow..." and the others joined in, terrifically off-key, laughing through it all.

"...And so say all of us! And so say all of us..." they continued trying to sing before it finally deteriorated completely. Harry found himself in a mass of hands patting him on the back and mussing his hair; Hermione kissed him on the cheek, as did Ginny, and even Malfoy clapped a hand on his shoulder, laughing as he said, "Happy Birthday, Potter."

Harry laughed and kissed Hermione and Ginny on the cheeks, clasped hands with Sirius and Ron, pretended good-naturedly that he was going to hit Malfoy, and smiled at the others until his face hurt. As he passed him, Ron leaned in and said in Harry's ear, "We need to talk," but he was hustled away by Sam and Aberforth and could only give Ron a perplexed look over his shoulder. Then Mrs. Figg said it was also to be a belated birthday party for Malfoy, as well, and the terrible singing started up again, but even worse than before, since the hysterical laughter had now gotten completely out of hand.

Hermione's mother had taught Sirius how to drive their car, and he and Hermione had driven down from the Grangers' in the middle of the afternoon. Mrs. Figg had been keeping Harry out of the kitchen (he'd had no idea) while Hermione made the food for dinner (*Good*, he thought, remembering the meal she'd made at the Dursleys.) Mrs. Weasley had taken Ron and Ginny to the Fawcetts' house, near Ottery St. Catchpole; the Fawcetts had let them use their fireplace to Floo to Diagon Alley (since the Burrow had been taken off the Floo network). Lupin had Flooed to Diagon Alley and Aberforth met them all there, then drove the three of them back to Mrs. Figg's house. Ginny brought the birthday cake, from her mother.

They all helped move the table to the garden (Sirius discreetly lengthened it) and with everyone working together and laughingly tripping over each other, it was soon set and laden with food. The talk whirled around Harry's head; he was feeling happy and giddy, as though he were a little drunk; the effect of not having had enough sleep, he supposed. Ginny was recounting having gone to Ruth Pelta's bat mitzvah the week before.

"It was so amazing! Her temple is very Moorish-looking, beautiful ornamentation, looks like ivory filigree with gold-leaf. And I thought she was going to *read* in Hebrew, but it's more like she's *singing*. Did you know Ruth has a beautiful voice? What she sang--I mean read--sounded so exotic and mysterious...It was amazing," she said again. "And the party afterward!" She nudged Ron. "You should have seen Ron..."

Harry nodded at him, his mouth full of Hermione's delicious lemon chicken. "You went?"

"Mum didn't want her going alone, so Ginny asked Ruth whether I could come too."

"And I'll bet you're glad you did..." Ginny said in a sing-song voice, looking mischievous.

"What?" Hermione wanted to know, looking far too interested for Harry's taste.

"Well," Ginny said, drawing it out. "Annika was there. And she looked smashing! Very blond, very tan, very Swedish-Amazon on her summer hols..."

"I thought she was Icelandic?" Hermione said.

"She is. Oh, you know what I mean. And she was *very* glad to see Ron..."

The tips of Ron's ears were extremely red. Harry tried to picture Ron with Annika, but couldn't. "She wouldn't bloody leave me alone," Ron complained. "And Amazon is right. When we were dancing, she was basically leading. Wouldn't let *me*."

Ginny looked very merry. "You didn't look all that upset at the time. I thought you liked blondes?" Harry assumed she was referring to Fleur Delacour.

Harry looked at Hermione; she was staring at her plate as if studiously ignoring the conversation. Harry swallowed. Was she bothered by the idea of Ron being with Annika? Not that he sounded particularly taken with her. Still--

"What are the twins up to?" Harry asked Ginny, changing the subject.

"Oh, didn't Ron tell you?" Just then, Harry realized that Ron hadn't written to him once since the end of term. "Percy has quit his job with the ministry, now that he's basically independently wealthy." Harry looked sideways at Malfoy; he looked fine about the fact that she was talking about the Malfoy family fortune going to Percy, so Harry turned back to listen to Ginny. "He bought a house in Hogsmeade, that big old pile at the end of the High Street that's been for sale for ages. The twins have moved in with him and they've made it the world-wide headquarters for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, Limited. Percy's the president and chief investor, Fred and George are the creative department, of course, Angelina is overseeing production and delivery, and Lee Jordan is the sales department. With his gift of gab, they've already got enough advanced orders for things that they'll be working the rest of the summer to fulfill. WWW Ltd. is going to be *huge*."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "Percy is heading up Fred's and George's company?"

"Correction," Ron said. "Percy's company. You know how he is; takes everything too seriously. He really rides herd on them. Everything goes like clockwork over there. He's up at six every day, sending owls and checking the ledgers, and rousing everyone else out of bed whether they're ready to get up or not..."

"Everyone else? Isn't it just the twins?"

"No; Angelina and Lee are living there too. Mum's very edgy about the Angelina thing. She has her own room and everything, but--let's just say I don't think she's ever slept in it..."

Harry smiled. "It sounds like they're having a great time, all of them. I never would have thought Percy would be able to work with the twins."

Ron shook his head, his mouth full. "Me neither," he said thickly, before swallowing. "But he's just what they needed; they'd still be floundering about if it weren't for him. They have no idea how to actually run a company, get distributors, handle sales, coordinate things. They'd be hopeless at all that. This way, they can just do what they do best and let Percy handle the business end of things, Angelina handle the day-to-day details, and Lee handle the blarney. It's a great partnership."

"We just went to visit them yesterday. The house is fabulous! It must be about four hundred years old. There are something like eight bedrooms, and a wonderful garden out back. The twins said they're throwing a party on the first Hogsmeade weekend of the term, for the returning students. The ones they know, of course. I can't wait!" She smiled at Malfoy, who looked like he was thinking of those eight bedrooms...

"Oh!" Ginny said suddenly, tearing her eyes away from her boyfriend. "I just remembered! We ran into Alicia in Hogsmeade. She's going to be teaching at the village school. Even though she's so young they gave her the sixth-years. She's really looking forward to it, but not working at the same school as Fleur Delacour. *She's* still teaching the first years. I'm not sure that's a fair thing to do to four-year-olds...The head teacher takes the seventh-years."

Harry furrowed his brow. "Isn't Fleur's sister going to be in seventh year?"

"I think so. And then after that she'll come to Hogwarts."

"And be a first year all over again..." Ron said with a sigh. "I'm kind of glad that we didn't go to the village school, Gin, but why didn't we?"

Ginny froze, her dark eyes very large. Then she swallowed the food she'd been chewing. "Oh, there was no need. You know. Since Mum used to be a teacher." Her voice shook a little and she didn't look Ron in the eye as she spoke. Harry looked at Malfoy, who was frowning; he didn't look like he believed her, or perhaps he looked like he knew the real reason...Harry had never really thought about Ron and Ginny going to school before Hogwarts. He knew there was a school in Hogsmeade, but he assumed it was only used by families who actually lived in the wizarding village.

After the meal, Harry and Malfoy opened presents, and there was much laughter and silliness. At one point, Harry was looking around the room,

feeling like someone was missing. He grimaced, irked with himself; why should he be there? It was stupid to expect that he would be...

Harry found Sirius talking to Lupin and Mrs. Figg and asked with more off-handed casualness than he felt, "Oh, by the way, how's Snape?"

It was as though he had suddenly suggested that they all strip and sing the national anthem in Portuguese. The tension was thick as molasses. "Er," Sirius said first, his eyes moving to Lupin as if for help.

"Harry," Lupin said smoothly, moving him into a chair, "sit down."

Once in the chair, Harry frowned up at them. "Why? What's happened?"

The three of them looked back and forth at each other again; they all were quite grim. "Harry," Lupin said again, "Snape's missing."

"*Missing?* For how long?" He couldn't hide how upsetting this information was to him.

"Five days."

"Five--" he began, then couldn't continue. He examined their faces; not a glimmer of hope there. Snape was missing for five days. "What was he doing?"

Sirius moved closer to him, speaking without moving his mouth very much. "He was on reconnaissance, information-gathering..."

"Why couldn't Rita do that? She's the bloody beetle."

Another exchange of grim looks. "She's missing too. For the last two weeks. That's what he was trying to find out about."

No, thought Harry. No no no no no. This is not happening. All of the operatives are not disappearing...

"And no one--"

"Harry. We're doing our best. We didn't want to worry you. We're going to find them. Please leave it to us and don't lose sleep over it."

As if I don't have enough things to lose sleep over, he thought. He swallowed as they drifted away from him. He noticed the three of them throwing him concerned looks every now and then, and quickly grew tired of it. Ron accosted him near the television, saying, "Harry, I want to talk to you..." but Harry turned from him and pulled Hermione into the kitchen and with no preamble, started kissing her.

After a half-minute, she pulled away. "Harry? This is rather--abrupt. You seem odd. Is something wrong?"

They stood with their arms around each other, their faces still very close together. He nodded, trying not to let tears steal into his eyes. *I am not bloody going to cry over Snape*, he told himself sternly. "Snape's been missing for five days," he told her quickly.

"Oh--" she breathed, putting her hand over her mouth. She leaned forward and pillowed her head on his chest, wrapping her arms around his middle. He gathered her to him, his cheek on her hair. How often, he wondered, will we be doing this in the coming days? Hearing about yet another person working on the side of good going missing, or turning up dead? Holding onto each other for dear life, wondering who will be next?

He's not dead, he reminded himself. *We don't know that. Yes, we don't know*, another voice in his head confirmed. *That's the problem...*

She lifted her face to his and he kissed her gently. "We need to think good thoughts," she said to him. "Can't afford to be defeatist." He nodded at her, but later that night, when he was simultaneously craving and dreading sleep, he wondered what the difference was between being defeatist and being realistic...

* * * * *

That night he had the dreams again. And the night after that, and the night after that. Harry figured he was perhaps getting about two hours of sleep a night. He was feeling edgy and snapping at people; he'd rung up Hermione in the middle of the night and gotten an earful from her about using common sense and not waking people up at three in the morning. She didn't normally snap at him, but he figured it was because he'd woken her from a sound sleep. A sound sleep...it sounded wonderful, but he'd forgotten what it was like.

He started to write to Ron one night, to pass the time, and he thought of asking him what he'd wanted to talk about at his birthday party. But there had been no owls from Ron; not once had Pigwidgeon shown up at his window with a parchment tied to his scrawny little leg. Harry tore up the letter he'd started. If Ron had something so important to say, let him say it, he thought. I'll wait.

He felt a bit crazed at work, too. For a few days, Malfoy didn't sun himself after lunch, like Harry and Sam. On Saturday, he finally did again, and Harry was shocked by what he saw when Malfoy took his shirt off. He'd been wearing sweatshirts to go running in the mornings, and now Harry knew why.

He'd gotten a spectacular tattoo on his back that resembled the scaly back of a dragon, then on his arms, it looked like unfurled dragon's wings. The bluish-green colors that had been used made it impossible to see the bruises his father had inflicted on him. He must have gotten it the night before my birthday, Harry thought, when he was supposed to be having dinner with Sam. He had to admit it was a masterpiece, and he wondered what Ginny would say when she saw it. This further depressed Harry...

Before he knew it, the summer was almost over, and Dumbledore had arranged with the Weasleys for Harry and Malfoy to visit the Burrow for a couple of days. They would do their shopping with Mrs. Figg first, in Diagon Alley, then take all their gear to the Weasleys'. Sirius was going to drive down to get them, after taking Hermione and her trunk. Harry was sorry to be saying goodbye to Aberforth and Sam, and even Mrs. Figg. But he was not sorry at the prospect of sleeping in a real bed again; he'd started blaming the sofa in the sewing room for his insomnia. At the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley had given the twins' old room to Ron, and Harry would be sleeping there too. Malfoy would be in Ron's old room, and Hermione would be in Ginny's room again, as Bill was using Percy's old room. Charlie had returned to his dragons in Romania, but he was able to come at a moment's notice if needed.

Before they went to Diagon Alley, Percy had owled Malfoy to inform him that he was the first recipient of the Penelope Clearwater Memorial Scholarship. The money he would need for school supplies and fees had been deposited in an account at Gringott's in his name. Malfoy drew his lips into a line. He looked like he resented being on the receiving end of charity and also like it was rightly *his* money to begin with. A strange combination, Harry thought. Malfoy exchanged the pounds he'd made working for Aberforth while they were at the bank, and he grumbled about Goblin exchange rates and fees the rest of the day. Then, when they were removing the money they needed from their respective vaults, Harry could tell by Malfoy's face, when he got back into the car, that Malfoy had seen the piles of silver and gold in Harry's vault. He tried not to look at him during the rest of the shopping trip.

Finally, the day came for them to go to the Burrow. To his surprise, Mrs. Figg hugged and kissed them both before allowing them to get in the Grangers' car, where Sirius was waiting at the wheel. They had already said goodbye to Aberforth and Sam the day before. Malfoy had claimed the front seat without an argument from Harry, who looked listlessly at the passing scenery; he'd never gone to the Burrow this way, an almost-normal way, in a car with all four of its wheels on the ground (he still smiled when thinking of the twins and Ron coming to fetch him after his first year, in their father's old flying Ford Anglia). The Knight Bus certainly didn't count as normal; he'd done that twice, and Floo powder was probably the furthest thing from normal, in Harry's book. It was odd to just pull up to the Burrow, honking the horn, seeing Hermione and the Weasleys come pouring out the door...Harry felt like he was moving in

slow-motion, or underwater as they greeted him and there were hugs and kisses and back-slapping all round. Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a good night's sleep. *A real bed*, he thought. He couldn't wait...

The next morning, Ron wanted to play Quidditch, so Harry went downstairs with his Firebolt, while Malfoy shouldered his new Cleansweep, the only thing he'd been able to afford at Quality Quidditch Supplies. He eyed Ron's and Ginny's Nimbus 2001s enviously. It was a Saturday, so Percy had generously allowed the twins the day off, and they showed up at breakfast with Angelina and Lee, inducing a boisterousness in everyone that helped jolt Harry awake a bit. He hadn't slept any better in a bed than he had at Mrs. Figg's.

Since there were enough of them to play four players on a side, Hermione didn't have to join in to even things out, to Bill's obvious relief. (He was playing but Lee was not; he volunteered to do commentary). Ron had chosen Ginny as his Keeper, to give her more practice, and Harry as his Seeker and Fred as his Beater. He was playing Chaser. George was Beater and Malfoy Seeker on the other team, along with Angelina playing Chaser and Bill as Keeper.

"What should I call the teams?" Lee wanted to know. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Hermione hovered nearby on brooms, to watch, since there weren't any stands to sit in and they wouldn't be able to see much from the ground.

"Well," Hermione suggested, "How about the Dragons for the side Malfoy's on, and the Griffins for Harry's and Ron's." She smiled at Harry; she hadn't exactly given away the fact that he was a golden griffin Animagus, but sometimes she made him nervous. It was as though because she was proud of him she wanted the whole world to know. He hadn't told her about transfiguring in front of Dunkirk to scare him. Then she'd be spouting off about breaking the law...

"All right then!" Lee Jordan started, after magically amplifying his voice. "And the Griffins are in possession, Weasley takes the Quaffle and speeds up the field, Dragons Chaser Angelina Johnson in hot pursuit. Keeper Weasley is in position, ready to stop Chaser Weasley--Angelina, if you marry that bloke of yours do *not* change your name--and Chaser Weasley scores on Keeper Weasley! The Griffins are in the lead, ten to zero!"

When Lee had made his comment about Angelina marrying George, her head had whipped around. She had been moving to intercept Ron, but her being distracted meant that the Quaffle sailed into the middle hoop easily, as Bill was also distracted by the suggestion of marriage. Harry looked at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who were glaring at Lee in a distinctly unfriendly fashion. They had always seemed to like Angelina before, Harry thought. On the other hand, she and George were basically living together now,

and Mrs. Weasley in particular didn't seem like the sort to approve of that...

"Harry!"

He was confused by the fact that it was Malfoy's voice crying out his first name; then he saw the reason. While watching the Weasleys, he'd flown right into the path of a Bludger hit by Fred. Before he could think, it struck the twigs on his broom, jarring him severely enough to be knocked off. He clung by his left hand, hanging straight down from the broom, feeling like his fingers were slipping off the wood one by one.

Ron and Ginny flew to him quickly, guiding his broom to an altitude low enough that his feet were able to touch down, and he was standing on solid earth again; then, after a moment, he collapsed to the ground, and the others all landed, concerned, while Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Hermione flew to a spot nearby. Hermione dropped her broom and came running to him as soon as she was back on the ground.

"Harry? Harry! Are you all right? The Bludger didn't hit you, did it?"

He opened his eyes; his glasses were askew on his face and her visage was swimming blurrily before his eyes. "No," he said, the word catching in his throat. "I think--I think I'm just a bit too tired to play right now. I didn't get much sleep last night...Can't concentrate."

Mrs. Weasley nodded and pulled him to his feet, put her arm around him. "Come back to the house and have a lie-down. They'll just have to make do without you." He nodded back and leaned on her; she didn't even come up to his shoulder now. Hermione walked on his other side, carrying their three brooms. He heard Mr. Weasley telling the others that he was sure Harry would be fine, and it had been *years* since he'd last played Quidditch...

Harry tried not to smile at the mental image of Mr. Weasley playing Quidditch. When they reached the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley gave him a sleeping draught and then he climbed the stairs to the room he and Ron were sharing, this time leaning on Hermione. His bones felt made of weariness; it was a miracle the Bludger hadn't sent him hurtling down forty feet to the hard earth. He was usually pretty good at paying attention to the Bludgers. Sleep; he just needed some sleep...

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said to him softly, steering him to Ginny's room instead of the room where he'd slept the night before.

"Wha--"

"Don't argue. I'll curl up with you, that should help you sleep. It always has before. You've been having nightmares, haven't you? That's why you called me that time, wasn't it?"

He nodded, his throat tight; he should have known she would figure it out.

"I wrote to Sirius about something I saw before I even went to Mrs. Figg's, but it's been much worse since then..."

"Sssh! Don't talk."

He lay down on the bedclothes, and she cuddled up next to him, her head on his chest, her arm thrown across him. He put his arms around her and closed his eyes, feeling the sleeping draught seeping into his brain, into his tired, tired, brain...

* * * *

His eyes flew open. He felt unnaturally alert suddenly, and not a little disoriented. It took him a moment to figure out why he was in Ginny's room. Hermione was no longer on the bed with him; she was sitting cross-legged on the other bed, a perplexed look on her face as she turned the heavy pages of the book on her lap.

"Hermione?" he whispered; he didn't feel as though he had his full voice.

"Mmmm?" she said, looking up distractedly, then she seemed very glad that he was awake. "Oh, Harry, look what I've found!" She scrambled to her feet and lugged the large book--which Harry could see now was a photo album--to the bed where he was. "Look!" she said again, starting at the beginning. On the front page of the album were two wizard photos; one was Mr. and Mrs. Weasley with a small very red-haired baby, two little boys about four and six years of age standing with them in front of a Christmas tree. The boys had an uncertain look about them. The younger boy kept trying to put a finger in his nose and Mrs. Weasley kept moving his hand away from his face. The hand-written caption read, "Christmas 1970, Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie and Annie." The other photo showed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill and Charlie again, looking a little older now. There was also a little girl with bright red hair and blue eyes, her curly pigtails flopping as she bounced up and down on her father's knee, while her mother held a baby that looked a little younger than the baby in the first picture. This caption read, "Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Annie and Peggy, Christmas 1972." Twenty-four years earlier. The girls in the photo in Mr. Weasley's office...

"They were sisters!" Hermione said breathlessly, as though she had read his mind. He nodded.

"I can see that..."

They turned the pages of the album, watching the little girls growing taller, thinning out at about the age of seven. The photos were mostly of the two girls, but there were more family portraits as well: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sitting while Bill and Charlie, about twelve and ten, stood on either side of them, the little girls, about four and six, knelt in front, while Mrs. Weasley held an irritated-looking baby with violently red hair (even more so than the rest of them). It was waving its arms agitatedly, the caption identifying all of them, including the fact that the baby was Percy.

Christmas 1976.

"Where the *hell* did you get that?"

Harry and Hermione jumped. When he saw who had spoken, he was even more surprised; he had *never* heard Mrs. Weasley swear. After a moment, she realized that she wasn't behaving as she normally did, and looked as though she were trying to calm herself. She smoothed down her robes, which did not need smoothing, and said in a higher-than-usual voice, "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry and Hermione. I was coming up to see how you were doing, Harry. What--what are you doing with Ginny's photo album?"

Hermione looked Mrs. Weasley in the eye sympathetically. "Mrs. Weasley--when did Annie and Peggy die?" she said softly. Instantly, Harry could tell that she wished she hadn't asked, for Mrs. Weasley started crying and sat down heavily next to him on the bed.

"That's just it--they didn't."

"But--"

"I know, I know. You find *that*, and you assume that they must have died. Well, it's just a bit more complicated than that..."

They waited while she blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "Oh, my," she said finally, sounding as though she'd just woken up. "I haven't thought about them for so long now. Then, every time I remember, it's like it's happened all over again..."

"You don't have to talk about it--" Hermione began.

"Oh," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, louder than she had spoken before. "But I want to. Don't worry about me; I'll be fine. Let's go down to the kitchen; I'll make us a pot of tea and I can explain everything to you...as much as there *is* an explanation..."

Harry and Hermione gave each other puzzled looks behind Mrs. Weasley's back as they went down to the kitchen. She'd been so distracted by seeing the photo album (which Hermione had carefully replaced on the shelves above Ginny's desk, where she'd found it) that she hadn't even

mentioned the fact that he had been on Hermione's bed in Ginny's room, not on his bed in Ron's new room.

"Where is everyone?" Harry asked as they went down.

"The twins went back to Hogsmeade with Angelina and Lee. Bill's upstairs, reading; Arthur had to go into the office for a bit, and Draco is helping Ron and Ginny de-gnome the garden. We'll have some privacy."

He nodded, wondering why having privacy was important; after all, the photo album had been in Ginny's room. Surely she knew what was in it.

After she'd made the tea, Mrs. Weasley sighed and walked over to the window, holding her cup and saucer. She stood with her back to them, looking out at her messy, prolific garden. "Do you know when Arthur and I were born?" she asked them, then didn't wait for an answer. "Arthur was born in 1938; I was born in 1940. I was five and he was seven when Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald and the Muggle war ended. Even though we were still so young, we remember the celebrations...between wizarding and Muggle England, I think the parties and general giddiness must have lasted for a month. It was strange, as well; we'd lived our whole short lives up to that point immersed in fear and uncertainty. Arthur and I met originally when we were quite young; like many Muggle children, our parents sent us up North for safety, away from both the Blitz and the Ministry, which was the focus of some of Grindelwald's attacks. You should have seen Diagon Alley, laid waste...Not that I saw it either, mind you. I was told by older children. The way it is now...much of it looks old, but it was rebuilt after the fall of Grindelwald. It was his people, not the Blitz, that did it.

"I started at Hogwarts in 1951; Arthur was a third year. We weren't even friends until he was almost done his seventh year; suddenly, he seemed to notice me, and we started to meet up in Hogsmeade sometimes..."

"Most of our courtship was conducted by owlpost, if you can believe it. I know that sounds so innocent to young people today. But I still had two years of school to finish and he had started working at the Ministry...Then, when I was eighteen, I went to work as a teacher at the village school in Hogsmeade. Many wizarding families simply educate their children at home, but there are a few schools around the country for those who can't tutor their own children, because of work or just because they prefer to send them to school, get them used to being around other children, especially if they don't have siblings."

She turned back to them, a shy smile on her face. "When I was twenty-one, Arthur came to the school and proposed to me in front of my class. You should have seen it: sixteen pairs of little eyes, round as saucers, as Arthur went down on one knee and begged me to marry him. As though I wouldn't say yes..." She colored, looking down. "We had quite a cheering

section when I said I would, believe me. No one knows quite how to be excited like a seven-year-old. I had started off with the littlest ones; by then I'd moved up a bit.

"We were engaged for almost a year. My mother wanted a proper amount of time to plan out the wedding. I'm the oldest of three girls, and I was to have a marvelous outlay...except we didn't really have any money to speak of for a wedding. It was just me, my sisters Emily and Meg, and our mum. Our da was killed in the Muggle war...he had thought that to be the greater threat, not Grindelwald, and he wasn't very well-thought of for it. Called a traitor by some. But Colm O'Connor was a good man, and a good wizard. Mum still has a commendation and medal he received from the Muggle War Office for his bravery, dying to save the men who served under him...I suppose we really do qualify for the name 'Muggle-lover' in this family. But I personally wear it as a badge of honor. I remember the sacrifice my da made. He didn't have to enlist in a Muggle army, put himself in front of horrible bullets and grenades and risk being censured by the Ministry if he did anything to help the Muggle war effort by magic. When I think of what could have happened here if Britain hadn't been on the winning side in the war...defeating Grindelwald would have been beside the point."

Harry and Hermione looked at her; Harry swallowed, remembering watching films about the Battle of Britain in school when he was younger. He wondered about his mother's family...His mum was born in 1960, Aunt Petunia in 1954. Their parents could have been born in 1934 or so, or perhaps earlier. His grandparents probably hadn't been much older than Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. They might have been teenagers during the war, or if they waited until they were older than twenty to marry and have their daughters, they might have been *in* the war. After all, they were Muggles. Harry looked at Molly Weasley, seeing her in a whole new light. He still hadn't heard about the other little girls, though.

"By the time we had scraped together enough money for a wedding, I was twenty-two and Arthur was twenty-four. We had been together for six years. Neither one of us had ever had another girlfriend or boyfriend. That didn't seem so strange in those days. I continued to teach after we married, but I quit a year later when we were expecting Bill...After that, I just wanted to focus on being a mother. Old fashioned, yes, but--I suppose that's just who I am.

"Many people, when they see large families, they assume that they just grew haphazardly. They don't think any planning went into them. Arthur and I planned everything quite carefully. Two years after we married, Bill was born. That was the plan. And we wanted him to have a little playmate who wasn't too far off from his age, so two years after that, we had Charlie.

"Now, I wasn't ready to be having another baby after that. I had two little ones in nappies who needed me to do everything for them, and Bill was already doing a great deal of accidental magic, even at the age of two. Actually, he was a little younger than two when Charlie was born. There was *never* any question of Bill being a Squib. I still have never heard of a wizard child manifesting the kind of magic he did at such a young age...the others were much easier on me."

"Arthur and I thought that when Charlie was four and old enough for school, it would be a good time to have another baby. When the boys went off to the school where I used to teach, on the first day of school for Charlie, mind you, I promptly went into labor! By the time the bus brought them home that afternoon, they had a little sister, Annie..."

"Bus?" Hermione puzzled. Harry wanted her to get back to the sister.

"Oh, yes. There's a bus that pops about the country, picking up the various children who attend the Hogsmeade school. Operates on the same principle as the Knight Bus." Molly Weasley sighed. "I confess, I adored having a little girl to fuss over even more than the boys. They'd also become so--I don't know, like little men. Didn't want their mum hovering over them. Even Charlie. And Arthur and I decided to try to do the same thing we'd done with them, have another baby about two years younger, so they'd be close to each other in age. And when Annie was just a couple of months past her second birthday, Margaret was born. Named after my sister Meg. We called her Peggy."

"Annie and Peggy adored each other from the start. The first time she was allowed to see Peggy, Annie tried to pick her up and hold her, like one of her dolls. We wondered a bit what we were about, blithely going on having children as though You-Know-Who hadn't been terrorizing the wizarding world for the previous two years. Perhaps we just didn't want to let him run our lives, decide how we spaced our children. It hadn't been that long; we just didn't reckon on him when deciding what to do."

"Then, when Peggy was three and Annie five, Bill went off to Hogwarts. Annie and Charlie were at the Hogsmeade school. In a year, Peggy would be old enough for school as well, so we did what we'd done before, planned to have another baby. Percy was born just before Peggy was to start school, and she was heartbroken; thought I'd gotten a replacement for her. I'll never forget her face when she got on the school bus. She looked so small and lost, and I had no choice but to stand there, holding the baby, waving goodbye to her, when what I really wanted was to bring her back in the house, get my little girl back."

"Once more, we decided to have a baby who would be a companion to the last one. We wanted the new baby to be born the year that Percy would turn two. But things didn't go as planned; the twins happened. Instead of having a baby who would be a playmate to Percy, the twins were

sufficient unto themselves. You know how twins are, especially those two. Poor Percy never really had someone to be his mate, because of that. And then, even at a very, very young age, Fred and George turned out to have mischievous senses of humor, and their favorite victim was Percy."

She turned back to them, walked to the table and sat down. She put down her tea and laid her hands on the table before her, very carefully. "We were done having children. We had seven children, five boys and two girls. I had quite enough work on my hands with a toddler and a pair of infants, all in nappies. We had no intention of having more children. We had our family."

She swallowed and looked at Harry and Hermione. "That was 1978, the year the twins were born. Then, a year later, during the children's Easter holidays..." she trailed off. "I know they blame themselves. Bill and Charlie. Especially Bill. I know that's why he dropped everything to come here from Egypt, why he's been putting his own life on hold, to make sure You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters don't...I heard him telling Charlie about having nightmares about getting here from Egypt and finding the Dark Mark over the house." Harry swallowed. He knew nightmares...

"I try not to badger him any more about settling down, about getting married and having children. The last time was years ago, he was seeing a nice girl, he was about twenty-six. A good age to marry, I told him, so he could start having children before he was thirty. 'Why,' he said to me, 'would I want to have children? I'd be a terrible father...'

"I argued with him about it for a while before I realized he was talking about Annie and Peggy, about how he blamed himself. I tried to reassure him, remind him he was only fifteen and Charlie thirteen...but I think it's something he'll never quite get over. After Bill's reaction, of course, I've refrained from talking to Charlie about the marriage-and-children issue. He wasn't the eldest, but he seems to be blaming himself as much as Bill..."

"What happened?" Hermione whispered. Molly looked up, meeting her eyes.

"You know, we used to just let the children go walking down the road to the village whenever they wanted? Arthur used to take the children to work. Once when Bill was twelve, Charlie was ten, Annie was six and little Peggy was only four, he took all four of them. It was when Percy was born, and I just needed them out of the house. I was completely overwhelmed, so he took them to work for the day. They Flooed to Diagon Alley and took the tube to Westminster. If Percy hadn't been born early, I wouldn't have needed Arthur to take them, they'd have been in school. But it was the end of the summer, and they wouldn't be in school for another week. So he took them off my hands for me.

"At any rate...when Bill was fifteen and Charlie thirteen, they were home from Hogwarts for Easter. Annie was nine and Peggy was seven. Percy was three and the twins were only a year old, but driving me to distraction. Bill was such a sweet boy...he volunteered himself and Charlie to take the girls into the village to play in the park. There were swings, and a duckpond for boat racing, and other children to play with...I was so grateful. All I could think was *there are too many children in the house!* After that day, I never thought that again..."

"Bill and Charlie say they had no idea how it happened. They said that one moment, the girls were swinging side-by-side while Bill and Charlie were kicking a ball around with some village lads who'd asked them to play with them, and the next--there were the empty swings, just swaying back and forth, back and forth. They didn't think anything of it at first; just assumed they'd met up with some other little girls to play dollies. So Bill sent Charlie to walk around on the paths in the park to find where they were, just so they'd know, like. I understand it's still a lovely park, but I haven't been there in years. I haven't been able to contemplate it...I think I would just spend the whole time wandering about, hoping to still find them, as though I could discover the *one place* the boys hadn't thought to look. Well, the boys and every wizard at the Ministry Arthur could pull into it..."

"Charlie couldn't find them, so he went to get Bill. Bill still wasn't especially concerned; they could have taken it into their heads to walk back home on their own, he supposed, or to go to the home of a new little friend to play tea party or some such. After a few hours passed and Bill knew they'd be expected home soon, he started to be concerned. He and Charlie were afraid to come home without them, they told me later. They didn't feel they could go to the Muggle authorities; what if the police wanted to come to the house, or asked what Arthur did for a living? Then they thought, the little scamps must have gone home already and they were panicking for nought.

"So they finally decided to come home themselves, coming in the door and saying, 'All right, you little terrors! Where are you?' I asked them where the girls were, and they looked shocked that they weren't back here. Arthur was home from work by then, and he went back to Ottery St. Catchpole with the boys, combing over every inch of the park, knocking on doors...He called in all of his favors at the Ministry, and suddenly there were twenty wizards running about the village using various charms to peer into people's houses to try to find Annie and Peggy."

She sighed and rested her cheek on her hand. "They never found a thing. Not a hair-ribbon, nor even the little bear Peggy still carried everywhere. We never figured out what happened to them. It was two years before the fall of Voldemort, so it could very well have been Dark Wizards...but we don't know it wasn't just Muggles, someone who...who fancied little girls..." She shuddered and put her face in her hands, crying quietly, while

Harry swallowed and tried not to be ill. He hated to contemplate the sort of person who would do such a thing, and why. You heard about it in the news, but never in lurid detail. It just didn't bear thinking about.

She dried her eyes. "Oh, the tears I've shed over them. I had such a hole in my heart, where they'd been. Charlie and Bill were back at Hogwarts, both feeling dreadful, and I had the twins and Percy to take care of, but all I could think of was missing my sweet little girls. When the boys were back from school in late June, I talked Arthur into trying to have another baby. The girls had been gone more than two months, and it was looking very bleak and hopeless. I told him, 'Yes, I know we said we were done, and yes, I'll be forty next year, but that's why it has to be now! I don't have much more time...'"

She sighed heavily. "I don't know whether I thought having another baby would serve as some kind of charm or what, so that the girls would walk in the house suddenly after it was born and say, 'Try to replace us, will you? Well, here we are!' Except that that didn't happen, of course. And then...Oh, I feel just awful about this, but I just couldn't help feeling at the time...when Ron was born, I was so disappointed. I'd hoped for another girl. I already had five boys. A mere two months later, I--" she blushed now, surprising Harry. "I managed to conceive again. I knew I shouldn't be too much older to have more children. Some witches dare to have children when they're fifty and older. But it's so much harder, not to mention the idea of running after a toddler at that age...So the following spring, Ginny was born, and I finally had a little girl again. I was happy, but...of course, nothing could bring back Annie and Peggy..."

Hermione's voice shook as she said to Mrs. Weasley, "Ron doesn't know, does he? He seems to think the girls were his cousins, and he just doesn't see them now that they're grown up."

She shook her head. "No, he doesn't know. Do you think I want to tell him I was disappointed he wasn't a girl when he was born? He's certainly no disappointment to me now, you know that, don't you? He's a wonderful boy...I wouldn't want him to think I'd ever thought otherwise. Percy and the twins were rather old when they found out, and Percy in particular didn't take it well, because he was old enough to have some fuzzy memories of them, and had asked me about them once or twice. I also gave him the cousin story until he was out of school. After I told him, he didn't spend much time at home, starting lauding Barty Crouch to the heavens and staying late at his office. He was a bit snippy with me for a while. So I decided to tell the twins before they went into their seventh year. They actually took it rather well..."

"When did you tell Ginny?" Harry choked out, hating to think of poor Ginny hearing about her missing sisters, and having been born to replace them...

She sighed. "That was unavoidable. After we came to Hogwarts in her first year--when we thought she'd died in the Chamber of Secrets--I was holding her tightly in Professor McGonagall's office, crying like an insane woman. I was so glad that she was all right! And I couldn't stop myself from saying, 'It was like Annie and Peggy all over again...'"

"Of course, she didn't know what I was on about. I explained it to her, crying the whole time, and then the little thing was holding *me* and comforting *me*, telling me everything was all right, of course I was bound to react this way..." She smiled and shook her head. "Ginny has always surprised me, from the day she was born. I should have known she'd be fine with it. I showed her pictures of her sisters when we returned home for the summer. She has all of them now; that was what you were looking at. I let her bring the album to school with her. After Ron was born, I had taken all of the pictures with the girls in them and put them in a separate album, instead of mixed with the pictures of the boys. Arthur has just that one hanging in his office; he didn't want to give that up, he said. He wanted to see them, remember them every day. After I told Ginny, I gave the album to her. I didn't really need the pictures. I could see the girls any time I wanted, by just closing my eyes."

Hermione sniffed and Mrs. Weasley handed her a handkerchief; she blew her nose noisily and dabbed at her eyes. "That's just dreadful, Mrs. Weasley. I mean, my mum and dad...I'm not sure I should say this, but they had *three* miscarriages before I was born. Mum was afraid to get out of bed the whole time she was carrying me. And she had two miscarriages when I was young, trying to give me siblings. Mum and Dad--they actually named all of the other babies. The ones that were never born. It's a very strange feeling, having all of these almost-family members. But it's not the same thing as Annie and Peggy. They were *born*. You *knew* them...I suppose that's why Mum almost never let me out of her sight when I was younger...Thankfully, she got over that, or I wouldn't have been allowed to go to Hogwarts."

Harry had never known that Hermione's parents had had such trouble creating a family. Molly put her hand over Hermione's now, nodding. "I did the same thing. After Annie and Peggy disappeared, we stopped sending the children to the Hogsmeade school when they were old enough. I taught them here at home. I had been a teacher, after all, for almost six years. But I also had Arthur grow that large privet around the garden, and I forbade the children to go into the village unless they were with me or their father. None of them went out into Muggle London again, to go to the Ministry. Just to Diagon Alley, for school supplies. The idea of their going out into London proper made me too nervous; I thought it would be too difficult to keep track of them on the Underground. I kept them all as close to me as possible. I was such a wreck when Ginny went off to Hogwarts, and then hearing about what was going on at the school, and the headmaster contacting us and telling us that Ginny was down in the Chamber..."

She covered her mouth with her hand. Hermione looked down at the table, swallowing. Harry nodded, understanding. He'd thought Ginny was dead too, and had felt awful...he couldn't imagine how Mrs. Weasley must have felt, already having lost her other two daughters.

They all jumped when the kitchen door suddenly flew open and Ron and Ginny came in, sweating and laughing.

"Did you see the last one?" Ron asked his sister breathlessly.

"The one making the rude gestures as you hurled him over the hedge? Yes. And I'll thank you to stop making that same gesture to Draco..."

Just then, Malfoy came in, looking happily tired. "That's the stuff!" he said with a satisfied air, throwing himself into a chair at the table. "Helluva lot--" he caught Mrs. Weasley's eye. "I mean, a heck of a lot more fun than that Muggle gardening we've been doing, Potter. Very satisfying, once you get the little buggers really flying through the air..."

Ron was laughing. "You should have seen the last one Malfoy had, Harry. Great big head, like a pumpkin that had been sat on..."

Harry listened with only half an ear to the stories about the de-gnoming. He watched Mrs. Weasley, and thought of Sam and Katie. So many families, torn apart. Had Annie and Peggy Weasley been taken by wizards or Muggles? He wished he knew. He looked at Ron as he talked; having seen what Ron was like on his sixteenth birthday, when he learned about Harry's and Hermione's relationship, Harry didn't hold out much hope that he'd take it well when he eventually found out about his sisters. On the other hand, the way Ron responded to just about anything hardly made people want to tell him things that were sure to set him off.

Harry actually felt well-rested after the sleeping-draught-induced nap, and laughed with the others at dinner and afterwards, wishing they'd had more time to spend at the Burrow instead of having to go to King's Cross the next morning to get the Hogwarts Express. Sunday night dinner would be the Welcoming Feast, then on Monday morning, bright and early, he would start his sixth year of school. School. Snape. Was Snape all right? Would he turn up by the first day of the term? If not, who would teach Potions?

After dinner, they lounged about the living room while Ron and Malfoy helped his mother clean up the dinner things. Mr. Weasley had already gone up to bed; it seemed that playing Quidditch earlier in the day had done him in. Ginny chattered on to Harry and Hermione, speculating on what the coming term would be like while they looked at her sympathetically; this was starting the grate on her, Harry could tell. She frowned, as if wondering why they were treating her like a child. Hermione was about to explain when Ron came striding into the room, great long

legs crossing it quickly, large feet thudding on the wooden floor, making the framed photos on the mantle shake. Hermione's mouth was still open; she shut it suddenly, then whispered to Harry, "Keep him busy. I'll tell Ginny we know." She rose to go, grabbing Ginny by the arm and pulling her toward the stairs. Ginny looked even more annoyed, but she raised her eyebrows to Ron and shrugged as she left.

Ron threw himself into a large worn leather armchair, and Argent leapt onto his lap and mewed loudly at him, demanding petting. Harry stayed where he was on the couch; for all that Hermione had told him to keep Ron busy, he was suddenly tongue-tied and had absolutely no idea how to accomplish this. It was as though he'd just met Ron and didn't know what topics of conversation might interest him.

"Want to play chess?" Ron asked casually, breaking the silence. He continued to pet the small silvery-striped cat.

"Sure." Harry rose to fetch the chess set from the bookcase next to the fireplace, pulling a small table over between the couch and Ron's armchair. They were silent as they set their pieces up, then started playing in silence. Ron let Harry be white.

Ron had a pile of Harry's captured pieces and Harry had a couple of Ron's. It had been quiet (except for Harry's pieces criticizing his decisions) for so long that Harry jumped when Ron spoke, he was so startled.

"Harry," he said suddenly. Harry looked up at him. "You know you've got to do it, don't you? Because she won't. Well--she can't. I mean, you remember the whole Viktor Krum thing. And the Time Turner."

Harry remembered that Ron had tried to talk to him a couple of times at Mrs. Figg's, on his birthday. Was this what he wanted to say? He could tell that Ron was talking about Hermione, but that was all. "What are you talking about?" he wanted to know.

"Breaking up with Hermione."

Harry shook his head; he thought he was hearing things. "What? Why would I break up with Hermione?"

"Because you're not in love with her." Harry started again; this he was *not* expecting.

"What?" he said again. "I--I love Hermione," he sputtered in a shaking voice, even as he realized that he'd never said this before.

"I didn't say you don't love her. Of course you do. And I love the two of you and she loves the two of us. We're friends, we love each other. That's different. I said that you're not *in* love with her."

"I'm--I'm--" Harry kept starting sentences, with absolutely no idea what to say beyond the first word. He took a deep breath and tried a different approach. "Are you telling me that you convinced me to stop pushing her away after Dudley died so that I can break up with her now, all because *you're* of the opinion that I'm no longer in love with her?"

"That implies that I ever thought you were in love with her. Well, that's not true--at one point, I thought you might be, and I *looked* for things to support it. I wanted to believe it, really I did. But the evidence just wasn't there."

Harry took great pleasure in taking one of Ron's pawns, getting a vicarious thrill out of the clouting his knight was giving it. "So you were trying to keep us together *why?*"

Ron calmly took the same knight with his rook. "At the time, it was because you needed her. Whatever the basis of the whole thing, you needed her, and she needed to know that you didn't blame her for Dudley. It would have been the worst possible time to break up."

"And in *your* humble opinion, what is the basis of the whole thing?"

"Well,--I'll tell you in a minute. Let me start small, so you get it." Ron leaned back, forgetting about the chess game for the moment, petting Argent, curled in a comfortable circle on his lap. "Remember third year, when she was going to all of those classes simultaneously, using the Time Turner?"

"What's that got to do with anything? And she's said that if we ever again throw in her face that she kept that from us, she'll hex us into the middle of our twenties."

"It's not that she didn't tell us. She wasn't supposed to. The point is that she started in on something that seemed logical to her, and when she found out she was wrong, she couldn't admit she was wrong. She hit Malfoy--not that I didn't fully support that, but it's not a *Hermione* thing to do--and she screamed at a teacher. Of course, it was Trelawney, but she's still a teacher. She practically had to have a bleeding house fall on her before she figured out that she wasn't a sodding immortal, that she needed sleep and downtime and all of the normal stuff that keeps us all sane." Harry winced, wondering when the last time was that *Ron* had had a proper night's sleep... "At the end of the year, she was definitely *not* sane. And it all happened because she did something she thought was logical and she couldn't admit she was wrong."

"All right," he said grudgingly, still feeling touchy about the sleep issue. "Fine. You've made your point about the Time Turner. But what has that got to do with Viktor, or me, for that matter?" Harry viciously moved his queen forward, placing Ron's bishop in jeopardy.

"I'm not trying to make a point about the Time Turner, Harry." Now Ron's queen took Harry's. "It's a pattern. Okay, next--Viktor Krum. She's hanging out in the library, he notices her and thinks, Good. There's someone with a real brain in her head. Not hovering about and giggling insufferably. I mean, she has miles more sense than most girls about how to behave around guys. And she hasn't gotten starstruck since Lockhart. I suppose that git being a fraud cured her of it."

"Anyway--" Harry prompted him, scanning the chess board for a move that wouldn't doom him. He didn't see anything promising.

"Anyway, he starts trying to get to know her better and she thinks, *Thank you, someone who's finally noticed I'm a girl.* We, of course, were being prats about that, so she was perfectly right. I see that now. And it seemed logical to her, again. Just like she probably thought she deserved the Time Turner, she probably thought she deserved Viktor Krum. You know, just for being *her*. She didn't think about the fact that he had feelings for her that she didn't return. That was just a messy detail. She couldn't admit she was wrong about being with Viktor Krum until she'd actually been abducted and returned, and it looked like he might have had something to do with it."

"He was under Imperius."

"Yes, but still. Second house that needed to fall on her head. She couldn't even break up with him properly. Then you came up with The Viktor Krum Plan, and even when that *worked*, she *still* couldn't get over herself and how it would look. That was in the spring. And she'd been snogging *you* since--when was it?"

"October," Harry grumbled, only pretending to stare at the board looking for moves now.

"Since October." Ron paused. "Time Turner--logical to her. Viktor Krum--logical to her. But she was wrong both times. And if there's one thing in the world Hermione's terrible at other than Quidditch, it's admitting she's wrong."

"So you're saying that Hermione is with me because she thinks it's logical? But she's wrong and needs a third house to fall on her?"

"Exactly."

"You lost me somewhere. What's the logic part? Because starting from the first moment I saw the picture she sent with my birthday card, logic hasn't played a very big role in this for me."

"You're the bloke. You saw that picture and since then you've been thinking with your--"

"Ron--" Harry warned.

--hormones. The logic part is on a lot of different levels. One, you're Famous Harry Potter. Who else is she going to be with after Famous Viktor Krum? Second, you're her friend. I think that was something she wanted to do that was different from Krum. Plus you don't mangle her name. But my point is--she's Hermione Granger, smartest witch--Muggle-born or not--to come through Hogwarts in quite a while. She's got a bit of an entitlement problem, has Hermione. She feels *entitled* to be with you, and the fact that the two of you aren't in love just didn't figure. Then on top of that, she was kidnapped and given that potion. So after that, she was magically compelled to go after you, too."

"But we didn't--you know--until after the potion had worn off."

"But you two probably wouldn't have gone as far as you did before that if it weren't for that potion. Then, after the potion wore off, and after she found out about the potion from Lucius Malfoy, she had to stay on the same path because she just couldn't admit that the potion had an effect on her. She didn't want to believe it. She had to stay with you at that point, for her own sanity."

Harry smirked. "I think that's the only time anyone's accused me of being *good* for anyone's sanity."

"She didn't like feeling manipulated, Harry. She likes to feel like she's in charge of herself at all times. I could see how shaken she was, when we were in the forest and Malfoy explained about the potion. Once again, she thought she was doing something logical, but she couldn't admit she was wrong. You've got to be the strong one, Harry. You've got to do the breaking up. She can't, and she won't."

Harry frowned at him. "I can tell you've thought this out, but that still doesn't mean you're right. And it's not as though you're a disinterested observer, are you? Nothing to gain from us breaking up?" He glowered accusingly at Ron, who maintained a mask of complete and utter innocence.

"Listen, Harry, I made a mistake with Parvati. I thought at first that I didn't want to be with a girl I didn't love completely. But it was kind of difficult to stay so high-minded when someone like Parvati was coming after me. So I thought, okay, where's the harm? Who says every person you ever date has to be someone who you think you're going to be with for the rest of your life? Why can't you just date someone to get to know them better? And then it turned out *she* was going kind of hormone crazy, and wanted to do more than date. That scared me. I mean--that's different. That's not just dating. That could make her think I had feelings for her I didn't. As tempting as it was, I resisted for a while. Which was

starting to make her think she was repulsive or something. I couldn't win. And then those Ravenclaws..."

"You should have seen your face..."

Ron nodded. "I just wish--I wish I could have had the feelings for her that she wanted me to. She's all right, is Parvati. And any guy who winds up with her is going to be damn lucky."

So you're changing your mind about the logic-and-Hermione-can't-admit-she's-wrong explanation for why we're together?"

"That's why she's with you. The hormone thing is why *you're* with *her*."

Harry frowned. "Well, I managed to resist her for some time, didn't I, for someone as hormone-crazed as you're saying I am."

"I resisted Parvati at first, too. I'm saying you finally gave in because of hormones."

Harry stared at the chess board again. What if Ron was right? What if--

"Of course, there's another thing about you that doesn't figure in the Viktor Krum thing or the Time Turner."

"What's that?" Harry couldn't keep the grumpiness out of his voice.

"Well, it's possible that Hermione first started coming after you when she did because You-Know-Who had just gotten his body back."

"Come again?"

"She kissed you on the train platform, then sent you that photo. All before Bulgaria. Think about it. I mean, how many times do you reckon Trelawney has predicted your death?"

"What has Trelawney got to do with it? It's probably over a hundred times by now. I've predicted my own death repeatedly, when I've done star charts. She thought I was wonderfully unflinching, remember? What a laugh..."

"My point is that she probably felt pretty safe predicting your death because she very likely thinks she'll be spot on at some point, and then she can point to prediction two-thousand thirty-seven out of four thousand and say, 'Aha! I knew it!' I mean, if somebody had to pick the one person at Hogwarts with the highest life-expectancy, it sure as hell wouldn't be you."

"That's just great coming from my best friend!" Harry drew his lips into a line and tried to calm his breathing.

"Oh, come on, Harry! I'm not saying it's definitely going to happen. In fact, as time goes on, it certainly seems less likely. You're an Animagus now, you don't feel pain even from the Cruciatus Curse, and your dueling is amazing--as long as you're extremely suspicious of the person you're dueling. I think that's why Neville beat you, too. Although being on those potions probably helped the most. But you can't tell me that a year ago, even you didn't wonder how much longer you might have. I mean, you saw Cedric die. One minute alive, the next minute--not."

Harry felt his heart beating faster and faster. "Are you trying to tell me," he said, through his teeth, "that you think Hermione is with me because I might *die* sometime soon? Because I have a huge target on me?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that--"

"Oh?" Harry said more loudly, getting angrier and angrier. "How *would* you put it? I have a life expectancy of zero, so she thought she'd shag me before *she* could be accused of necrophilia?"

"Harry shut up!" Ron hissed at him. "Before someone hears--"

"This conversation is *over!*" Harry informed him. He stormed out of the room, trying to get as far as possible from his best friend. Correction, he thought. *Former* best friend. Then he thought of something and turned his heel, returning to the living room.

"And another thing--"

"I thought this conversation was over."

"Another thing," Harry repeated, ignoring him. "I think that from now on, my best friend will be--will be Draco Malfoy. There! How do you like that, former friend?"

"Harry--"

"Did you hear yourself?" Harry demanded. "Did you *listen* to what you were saying? How can you claim to be my friend and say those things?"

Ron looked sadly at him. "Harry, it's *because* I'm your friend I can say it; that I *have* to say it. You have to break up with Hermione because she won't do it. It's simple."

"Oh, yes, it's simple. I have to break up with her to make everything easy for you, Weasley. *Not effing likely.*"

Harry had never spoken this way to Ron before. He'd never spoken this way to *anyone* before, not even Dudley, or his aunt or uncle (although he'd thought similar things at them). He'd never even spoken this way to Draco Malfoy. He didn't even do anything like this the only time he was ever almost as angry at Ron, when Ron refused to believe Harry hadn't put his own name in the Goblet of Fire.

He stormed out of the room and straight into Draco Malfoy. Malfoy looked alarmed but immediately recovered by replacing this expression with a smug look. "So," he drawled. "I'm to be your best friend, now, am I?"

Harry pushed past him and went up the stairs. "Sod off, Malfoy." He went up the steps two at a time, holding tightly to the railing, walking blindly, his eyes filled. How could Ron say those things about him, and about Hermione?

He undressed down to his drawers and crawled into bed, his mind racing; he didn't hold out much hope that this night would be much more restful than any of his other nights during the previous month. When he heard Ron enter the room a little while later, he feigned sleep, turned away from Ron with his eyes closed. Ron did not try to speak to him; he heard rustling, implying that Ron was preparing for bed; then he heard the springs squeak as Ron got into the other bed.

Ron's words rang through his brain as he finally started to drift off...*You've got to be the strong one, Harry. You've got to do the breaking up. She can't, and she won't.*

Well, I'm damned if I'm bloody well going to do it, Harry thought.

Sod off, Ron Weasley.

* * * * *

Harry woke before anyone else the following morning. Actually, it was the sixth time he'd awoken, but he tried not to dwell on that, because then he'd have to think of all of the dreams that had caused the waking...Today he would be getting the Hogwarts Express to school for the sixth time; no, wait--for the fifth time. Technically, he didn't take the Express in his second year. He and Ron had flown the car...

He looked at Ron's sleeping form wistfully. Those were the days. Flying to school together in a car. He couldn't help grinning at the memory. Perhaps he should just try to forget about what Ron had said while they were playing chess. Act as if it hadn't happened. It might be the only possible way for them to go on.

There was a flurry of activity in the house as it slowly came to life. Miraculously, they were all ready with their trunks, owl cages and cat-

carriers when the Ministry cars came to take them to the train station. It was strange not to be going with the twins. Ron no longer had older brothers at Hogwarts; he would be the senior Weasley in Gryffindor Tower now. Harry thought of all of the older students who no longer were students; it will be even stranger next year, he thought, when we're in seventh year. But this was strange enough.

Harry, Hermione, Bill and Mr. Weasley were in one car; Malfoy, Ginny, Ron and Mrs. Weasley in the other. As usual, Harry marveled at the way the cars squished themselves into the most unlikely spaces and seemed to cause dustbins and fire-plugs to jump out of the way, similar to the Knight Bus. It was never dull going to the station in a Ministry car.

They made good time; it was only ten-twenty when they arrived at the station. The first person Harry saw upon getting out of the car was Will Flitwick. He smiled; Will had shot up over the summer, but was as thin as ever. He looked like he'd been put on the rack, and his face still had a round childishness to it that made him seem like an elongated greeting-card angel. Harry strode over to him and shook his hand.

"Will! Had a good summer? Ready for second year?"

"*Ripping* good, Harry. You have no idea--and look!" He held up a new Firebolt. "I can have a broom now. I'm going to try out for the Quidditch team!"

Harry felt a pang of sympathy; it wasn't many people who qualified for teams in their second year. He and Malfoy were unusual, starting in their first and second years respectively. "Well, I'm not the captain now, you know; Ron is. Don't be too disappointed if you don't make it. Since Ron and I are in sixth year and Katie's in seventh, there'll be at least three openings in the next couple of years. You have plenty of time."

He nodded sagely. "I know. But it can't hurt to try, can it?"

Harry was about to affirm this optimistic adage when he saw that Will was momentarily distracted, and he turned to see what had caused his mind to wander. Dean Thomas had arrived, with his sister Jamaica, who was also starting her second year. Harry remembered thinking during the previous year that Will might have a bit of a crush on Jamaica, and he saw that the evidence was still there. To be fair, he thought Will was displaying excellent taste; Jamaica had blossomed over the summer, and she could easily be mistaken for fifteen or sixteen. She no longer appeared to be a child, but was both stunning and poised, with a singularly intelligent look behind her eyes, and Harry wondered whether Dean would spend the better part of his time in school this year beating off boys who were trying to get to his sister. Dean looked very annoyed about the looks Jamaica was getting from some fifth and sixth year boys from Ravenclaw.

Then Harry saw Justin Finch-Fletchley; he waved to him, and Justin waved back, looking as distracted as Will. Then Harry saw what had caught *his* attention; the Quirkes had arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Quirke exclaiming over their only son, who was wearing his Head Boy badge on his knit waistcoat, carrying his robes over his arm like a raincoat he couldn't be bothered to put on. Then Harry saw that Liam had caught Justin's eye, and there was this *spark* that seemed to pass between them. He wondered whether there were more couples at school now than there used to be, or whether he was simply oblivious when he was younger and had not been interested in being part of a couple himself. He remembered Ginny's news about catching Percy and Penelope kissing...

Then he remembered what happened to Penelope, and tried to stop that train of thought. Perhaps Percy was throwing himself into running the twins' enterprise to distract himself from that, to stop thinking about Penelope. Harry knew that it had been helpful for him to work for Aberforth during the summer; the daily grind helped distract him and make it less likely that he would suddenly start thinking about Dudley...

Will went over to talk to Dean and Jamaica, and Harry noticed that Ron and Hermione were standing very close together; Ron seemed to be whispering something in her ear. She colored and laughed, hitting him on the arm (not hard), then grasping his arm and continuing to hold on as her laughter continued. Harry frowned, watching them. He didn't move from where he was standing as the other students and their parents discreetly slipped through the barrier to access Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters. Finally, there weren't any others in their party waiting to go through except for him and Bill. He picked up Hedwig's cage and Bill walked ahead of him, pulling his trunk for him on a station trolley.

Bill had gone through and Harry was about to do the same, when he felt compelled to stop. A cold wind had suddenly whipped through the station, and the sky grew very dark. Harry looked up; there were no clouds overhead, but the sky was definitely darker. He turned, looking for the location of the sun, and inexplicably, not finding it.

He swallowed, looking around. Then he noticed that the Muggles who had come to get trains from Platforms Nine or Ten were not moving. He stared, just in case it was some trick of the light (which had a strange greenish quality to it). He remembered reading once that some people who got caught in a tornado in North America had described the strange green-tinged light that had directly preceded the storm's arrival. A tornado? In London?

But now he looked to the car park, and the people there were motionless too; the entire world seemed to be in a freeze-frame moment. Harry's heart was beating very fast; he reached down to withdraw his wand from the long pocket in his jeans. He didn't like this. Something was happening. He just wished he knew what.

"Hello, Harry."

He whirled around at the familiar voice. Amidst the frozen people, only he and one other person in the world seemed to still be moving in a normal fashion. Harry looked up at him, his heart beating painfully fast. It was as though in all the world, only two people existed. It was just him and--

Voldemort.

Chapter Three

The Last Temptation

Harry stared at the unnaturally tall, thin wizard, at the eerily red eyes and strange, flat nose. Harry's hand gripped his wand too tightly, making his knuckles ache. He thought of all the families who had been hurt by this monster; the Bells, the Clearwaters, the Flints, the Longbottoms--

The Potters.

His hand shook; it's just me or him, he thought. Somehow he's--he's stopped time. Harry tried to look around without taking his eyes off Voldemort. Still no movement from anyone. He looked at the dark wizard again, his throat tight.

"What have you done?" he demanded, trying to sound hacked-off instead of terrified. "Why aren't they moving?"

A smile, or what passed for one. Harry thought he was going to be ill, looking at it.

"They *are* moving, Harry. But we are moving far faster, so to us, they appear to be standing still."

Harry frowned, lowering his wand. "*What?*"

"No one can freeze time, Harry. You can, however, use magic to move very, very fast. I have cast the *Tempus Fugit* spell on just the two of us, so that we could have a conversation here in private, in the infinitesimally small space between two milliseconds..."

"The space between two *milliseconds*? But--"

"Harry. You are a very talented young wizard, I will grant you that. But there is much you have not learned in the last five years. There are things you will not learn in the next two years. I spent many years in research before I lost my body, and I have spent a good deal of time doing research since getting it back. Trust me when I say that I know far more about these things than you do."

Harry stared hard now at a woman who, in normal time, would be walking along briskly, pulling behind her an oblong black bag with small built-in wheels and an extendible handle, which rendered a station trolley unnecessary. The heel of the foot in front of her appeared to be an inch off the ground; her free arm was caught in midswing. Harry looked at her foot, willing it to come down and strike the ground, however slowly. But she appeared to be a very realistic sculpture, her foot forever *about* to land on the ground, her eyes caught in mid-blink...

"How fast are we moving?" Harry wanted to know.

Voldemort looked thoughtful. "Well, if it were possible for this spell to last fifty years--which it is not--and you did actually live at this speed for what feels to *you* like fifty years, after that time--" He pointed to the woman Harry had been looking at. "--her foot will still not have hit the ground." Harry swallowed. Is that what he was going to do? Keep Harry moving at this speed, then finally end the spell, with the result that people would suddenly see a thirty or forty-year-old Harry Potter where sixteen-year-old Harry had been moments before? If he did it repeatedly, he could put Harry into doddering old age in no time...except that it wouldn't feel like no time to Harry...

"You said you wanted to have a conversation," Harry said, pointing his wand at the older man again, trying to sound authoritative. He hoped it wasn't too obvious that he was shaking very badly.

"You haven't been sleeping very well, have you Harry? When is the last time you had a good night's sleep?"

Harry ignored this; his breathing felt labored and his eyes were slightly unfocused. "*What the hell did you want to say to me?*"

Voldemort looked calmly at him and took out his wand. He pointed it at Harry's wand arm. "Lower your wand, Harry. You know we cannot duel. I found out why; I sent one of my servants to that Ollivander fellow..."

"You didn't hurt Mr. Ollivander, did you?" Harry felt anger pulsing through him at the idea of Mr. Ollivander suffering because of him.

"Not at all. He saw the--*wisdom*, shall we say, of freely sharing the information my servant requested. Did you know our wands are brothers?"

"Yes," Harry snarled. "I've known that since I was eleven."

Voldemort nodded. "Ah. So you went into our little encounter last year knowing something I did not. Interesting. Well, what I wanted to talk to you about is exactly that: Our wands are brothers. I have been looking into some very special things that can be done together by two wizards whose wands are broth--"

"*Together?* Why would I want to do anything with *you*?"

"Ah, I'm glad you asked that question, Harry. As you might imagine, I have an answer for you. There are a number of spells, most of which you will not learn in school, that are designed to be executed by two or more wizards. The more compatible their wands are, the more potent the spell is. If a tandem spell were being cast by, say, two wands with unicorn hair for their cores, it is far more likely to be successful than, say, one wand with unicorn hair and one with dragon heartstring."

"If, in addition to having compatible cores, the wands' core sources are *identical*--the same unicorn, for instance, or the same dragon, or, as is the case with us, the same phoenix--the potency and magnitude of the spell increases a thousand-fold, possibly more."

Harry tried to stay focused; he kept his wand raised and aimed at the tall figure, but he was starting to feel doubts wrinkling across his brain. What if he were just hallucinating this? He'd been suffering from insomnia for so

long, he could believe he'd started to dream while awake. What else could explain this? This just couldn't be real...

But then he shook himself and glared at Voldemort again. "I already asked why you think I'd want to do anything with you? I know you want to absorb my power, since you're still so much weaker than you used to be. Do you think I'm going to fall for this?"

Another unnatural, unnerving smile. "There's nothing to fall for, Harry. I've seen that you are capable of making an ally out of an old enemy, if that old enemy is working toward the same goal you are."

"We do *not* have the same goals!" Harry shouted, feeling his heart pounding in his ears.

"Oh, but we *do*, Harry, we most certainly do. I have had quite a while to think during the last year, in addition to researching wand-brothers. There is something I did in the past which I deeply regret, and I know that you do too. Something I wish that I could undo. And with your help, I can. By using our two brother wands in tandem..."

"What are you talking about? I don't want anything that you do!"

There was an ominous pause before the older wizard said softly, "I disagree." He narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing Harry closely. "Are you telling me you don't want your mother to be alive? Because I very much was under the impression that you did."

"*My mother--?*" Harry trailed off, not comprehending.

"Are you telling me that *every time* you looked in the Mirror of Erised, you saw yourself holding the stone that Flamel created? Because I find that hard to believe. It seemed to Quirrell--and to me, debilitated as I was at the time--that you had seen the Mirror before, that you knew exactly how it worked. Tell me, Harry, the first time you ever looked in the Mirror, what did you see?"

Harry swallowed, remembering the first time he'd encountered the Mirror, when he was sneaking around the castle under his Invisibility Cloak in the middle of the night. He'd never before seen his mother and father, and their parents, and *their* parents...Harry wasn't even sure who some of the people in the Mirror were. Hagrid hadn't yet given him the photo album that was now nestled in the bottom of his trunk, and he had simply stared and stared, not understanding what he was seeing...

"I think you know what I saw. I saw my family. You took them away from me. Have you come here to gloat?"

"Hardly, Harry. I have thought a great deal about your parents during the past year. I think it would be fair to say that if I had it to do again--I wouldn't. But that doesn't signify; we must both want it to be different--"

Harry frowned. "What are you talking about?" Had Voldemort actually said that if he could do it over, he *wouldn't* kill his mother and father? "You can't raise the dead; no one can."

"What makes you say that? It has a name, doesn't it? *Necromancy*. A dark art, to be sure, but an art nonetheless. I don't personally know of anyone who has done it successfully, but then, for years alchemy was decried--and yet, Nicolas Flamel attained the pinnacle of that field, did he not? It only takes one. But I am not proposing that we dabble in necromancy

today, Harry. It is too fraught with uncertainty." The tall wizard waved the thin fingers of his left hand. "Look around you. You can see that I know a great deal about spells that can manipulate time. Do you think this is the only one there is?"

"Of course not. I've even traveled back through time myself," he blurted out, before he could stop himself. "And I know that you can't change the past..."

He looked very interested in what Harry had said. "You've gone back in time? How far? What spell did you use?"

"It wasn't a spell. I went back a few hours using a Time Turner, and Dumbledore said--"

Voldemort looked disgusted, as though he would spit. "A *Time Turner!* A mere toy! And as for that fool Dumbledore--"

"Don't you talk about Dumbledore! Don't you even say his *name!*" Harry cried, shaking, attempting to keep his wand trained on Voldemort despite his nerves being shot. *So tired...*

"You would continue to defend that doddering old fool when he lies to you and makes you think your parents are lost to you forever?" Harry noticed that he was making less of an effort now to be conciliatory; in a way, he was glad. It seemed a very unnatural personality for Voldemort. "It is true that one cannot change the past, especially with a trinket like a Time Turner--but while the past cannot be changed--the future *can* be. Every moment, the things we do and say--the decisions we make--change the future. At any given point in time there is an infinitude of futures before us, and what you do--or what is done *to* you--determines in which of those futures you find yourself...A Time Turner returns you to your departure point, and so you cannot do anything that would take you to a different timeline, a different starting point. It is very limited. But to create a *new* future...there is a spell that I have come across, a spell which requires two wizards..." Harry's heart was in his throat. His head was pounding. Could he be telling the truth? Was there actually a way to change past events--or was it future ones? "There is a special requirement for this spell, Harry. The two wizards must share a very *particular* bond. One of them must have been wronged by the other. In performing the spell, both wizards must wish with all of their beings for the wrong to be righted..."

"You're saying that you want to undo my parents' deaths?" You expect me to believe that?"

"Well, to be completely honest, Harry, we cannot undo more than one wrong. Killing your mother and your father was two. You would have to choose one of those to fix..."

"What? You tell me that you regret killing my parents, it can be undone--but I have to *choose* one of them? That's *sick*--"

"Not at all, Harry. I did not create the spell. There are limitations to these things. But if you are having difficulty deciding, I might be able to help you...If you chose to undo your mother's death, you could actually save two lives..."

Harry frowned at him, keeping his wand in position. "You're not making sense. But then why should you start now? Nothing you've said makes any sense."

Voldemort leaned forward, speaking more softly. "One of my servants has found something quite interesting in the death records at St. Mungo's. When your mother's body was examined after her death..."

"After you *murdered* her, you mean!" Harry snarled.

Voldemort bowed his head deferentially, making Harry tense up suspiciously. "True. I murdered your mother. And, it seems--your unborn sister."

"*Sister?*"

"That is what the hospital records say. I have seen them myself. The child would have been born in March of 1982..."

Sister? his brain was screaming. Voldemort had killed his mother and his unborn *sister*...

He glared at the dark wizard, feeling more suspicious than ever. He watched as he put his left hand in his robe pocket and withdrew it, holding a small brass object about as big as Harry's hand.

"Here, Harry. You will need this before we can proceed." He tossed the object to Harry.

"Hey!" he cried as he deftly caught it with his left hand. "I never said--" But Voldemort was gone. The spot where he had been a moment before was empty. Harry heard something and was startled; he hadn't realized how quiet it had been when he was under the *Tempus Fugit* spell. Now he was moving at the same speed again as the rest of the world. People walked to and from the platforms and the car park. A train pulled into Platform Nine; passengers poured out of the open doors while people waiting to board stood by impatiently, the anxiety showing on their faces that they might not make it on before the doors closed again.

His mind still reeling from his odd encounter with Voldemort, Harry now had a more mundane panicky moment; he needed to get onto Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters before he missed the Hogwarts Express. And he needed to tell Bill and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley what had just happened.

What time was it? Then he looked down and realized that the object that Voldemort had tossed to him was a clock. It was an old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock. There were two bells on top linked by another piece of brass like a kind of handle; there was a clapper between the bells, poised to strike them in quick succession when the clock displayed the time for which the alarm was set. According to the clock, it was ten-forty-four.

Harry checked his watch; the clock was correct, assuming that his watch was still working properly, after his being in the space between milliseconds with Voldemort...

He looked at the little brass clock again. The alarm was set for ten-forty-five. Harry frowned, watching the clock's larger hand move to the nine, feeling a foreboding even as the clapper started striking the bells, producing a shrill ringing. He realized too late that he shouldn't have continued to hold the clock, but before he could drop it, he felt that sickening hook behind his navel, pulling his body into a dark limbo where

he tumbled head over heels, his sleepy, addled brain screaming *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. He should have known not to touch anything Voldemort gave him, especially after the Triwizard Cup...

Harry grunted as he landed painfully, the clock still clutched in his left hand, his wand in his right. He stumbled but quickly righted himself, feeling in his sleep-deprived state more sharp and alert, somehow, than he felt when he was well-rested. He stared around him, wondering where he was and at the same time, *knowing*, knowing exactly where he was... The grass on the moors was so green it almost made his eyes hurt. The sky was a cornflower blue, with scattered white clouds like gamboling sheep. The weather was far nicer in Wales--for he was certain that was where he was--on this first of September than it was in London. It is still the first of September? he thought, uncertainly. Had the clock Portkey taken him through time and space, or just space? A light breeze moved Harry's hair slightly; he looked around apprehensively. Voldemort was nowhere in sight. He looked down into the valley. Was it still there? he wondered. All thoughts of getting to school had fled from his mind. Hell, he thought, I could always wait until dark and fly there under my own power, as a golden griffin...

In the meantime, he felt himself being pulled inexorably toward the valley. He was barely able to restrain himself from running. He would have so much more freedom this time; when he and Hermione had gone into Snape's Pensieve, they had been limited to seeing only what Snape had seen on the night his parents had died.

He drew nearer and nearer to what he thought was a clump of trees. When he was about thirty feet away, he could see that there were only two trees, in the front garden, exactly as he remembered; over the ruins of the small house, over the fence and garden gate and around the trunks of the trees, an insidious wild vine had grown, covering everything with a strange leafy green shroud. It was as if a topiary had been executed by a blind man, or by a modern artist, perhaps.

His eyes watering, Harry walked to the gate. He couldn't open it; the vines were too thickly massed. He leapt lightly over it, landing shin-deep in the vines. He had to carefully lift each foot up out of the sea of green to walk to the house to avoid getting hopelessly tangled or tripping.

He stopped when he reached the large, flat stone that formed the step before the front door--or where it had once been. The lintel at the top of the door frame had collapsed; the jambs still stood, one at a slight angle, both festooned with vines. He stepped over the fallen lintel, between the jambs, entering his house for the first time in almost fifteen years.

To his left he could see the remains of the stone fireplace, heaped with vines. He could even see the wooden frames of what had been the upholstered furniture flanking the fireplace, where he'd seen his mother and Snape sitting, arguing, while he had been an oblivious baby, trying to play with his mother's earrings, having no idea of the life-and-death nature of the conversation.

He had to lift his feet very high now; the vines were more than knee-deep. He made his way across what had been the living room to the

kitchen; he passed the nursery on the way and tried not to notice that a large wooden beam had fallen across what had been his cot. In the kitchen, the sturdy wooden table in the center of the room was still in place. He thought he saw something blue and he pushed aside some vines on the table top, finding a willow-pattern teapot, perfectly preserved under its covering of green. Harry picked it up, a lump in his throat as he turned it round, picturing his mother pouring tea from it. Was he just making up that memory? Was it genuine or just some combination of being here now and having seen the house in the Pensieve, months before his parents' deaths?

There was a Welsh dresser to his left; he goose-stepped his way over to it, pushing the vines out of the way, revealing more willow-pattern china: chipped cups and saucers, plates with slimy trails across the surfaces. And there, nestled among the vines and damaged china, a picture frame of tarnished silver, with cracked glass in it still. Through the cracks he could just about make out the picture.

It was his mum, holding him on her lap when he was a baby. He had the same picture in the album that Hagrid had given him. He traced the outline of her face with his finger, traveling over several breaks in the glass as he did so.

"Harry."

He looked up, his only surprise stemming from the fact that he was not at all surprised that Voldemort was here now. Surely, thought Harry, he would not bring me here for nothing. He had known, deep down, that it was inevitable that the dark wizard should be here as well. And if they could not duel, what then? How would Voldemort go about getting what he wanted, Harry's power, or even Harry as a faithful servant, a Death Eater?

He turned to face him again, trying to keep his face expressionless. Voldemort stood outside the house, although of course Harry had no trouble seeing him because of the crumbled walls. "What do you want?" he asked as calmly as he knew how. *Nerves of steel, Potter*, he told himself. *Nerves of steel*.

"It is my understanding, Harry, that when you thought your friends were at risk, you volunteered to become a Death Eater. Wormtail told me."

Harry gazed back at him impassively. "It is also my understanding," he went on, "that you have become an Animagus. A lion, to be precise. You put quite the scare into poor old Wormtail, chasing him through the forest..." Harry still gazed back at him, not changing his expression, or indeed, not wearing any particular expression at all. He tried not to smile at the assumption that Wormtail had made; he had no idea that Harry was really a golden griffin Animagus. Then he found it easy not to smile as he remembered the waking dream he'd had wherein Voldemort and his heir had put the Cruciatus Curse on a caged lion...Did he dare ask about the heir? Not yet, yet decided. Not yet.

He'd put the clock Portkey on the dresser, but he still held his wand tightly in his right hand. He swallowed, making certain that his eyes did not stray from the other wizard, ready to dive or dodge out of the way of a curse or

hex, or ready to counteract a spell with his own wand, perhaps causing that web of light to appear again, and the sound of phoenix song... Voldemort continued speaking. "...which just makes me think that you are more loyal and also more talented than I had given you credit for. Loyal, of course, to those with whom you feel a kinship, a bond. It only convinces me further of your value to me." He laughed that dreadful, horrible laugh. "How I wish I could have seen Wormtail running away from you..."

Harry found himself remembering that frenzied race through the Forbidden Forest, culminating in his being thrown against a tree by the giant Orst. If only he'd caught Wormtail...Sirius might be cleared, and Voldemort wouldn't know he was an Animagus...

"However," the tall wizard went on, "I think that Lucius was going about this recruiting business all wrong. Yes, he was accustomed to using this method since before your parents died, and all of his son's life as well. It was what he was used to...and look where *that* got him. Did his son feel his ultimate loyalty should be to his father? Did he do as he was told? No, he did not; he turned on his father and helped put him in prison. And even though we *did* gather in some new recruits, especially after quite a few went sour...I can't help think what a waste the others were. If only we'd given them some *incentive*, I have often thought since. Something *desirable* with which to tempt them..."

"I have the privilege of being able to learn from Malfoy's mistakes, Harry. I understand now that you, in particular, must be *wooed*, not threatened. I need to convince you that I can do far more for you than Albus Dumbledore. Did Dumbledore ever offer to let you stay with your friends' families during the holidays instead of those horrid Muggles who hate you, and whom you hate in return?"

"He might have done if he didn't have to worry about *you* coming after me..." Harry grumbled. He was thoroughly ignored.

"And who left you with them to begin with? I'm guessing Dumbledore did that as well."

"Which he wouldn't have needed to do if you hadn't orphaned me!" Harry retorted, then clenched his jaw, trying to exert strict self-control again. Voldemort ignored his outburst.

"Has he once interceded on your behalf with your most hated professor? I think you know who I mean. Has he slapped down that whelp, Malfoy's son? Oh, now he's quite the golden boy, but before that he was nothing but a thorn in your side, wasn't he?"

Harry was running out of counter-arguments; these last things he had said were true enough, even though Snape wasn't all bad, he'd decided in the last year. He had to bite his tongue to avoid asking him what he'd done to the Potions master, where he was holding him, or how he'd killed him...

"Dumbledore let you face me on your own when you were not quite twelve. He didn't have any clue that my loyal servant was masquerading as Moody for almost an entire year. Crouch wanted to bring you to me sooner than the end of the Tournament; he'd worked out how to make a

Portkey to bring you to my father's grave many months before. But Wormtail was still tracking down the other ingredients for the potion to re-embody me, and performance of the spell we were going to undertake to give me my body back had to be timed just right...The most auspicious time for it was near Midsummer, and when we discovered that the Third Task was to be just three days after Midsummer, it simply seemed too wonderful to use the Cup as the Portkey...You would arrive, flush with your victory, not knowing how Crouch had helped you, not knowing what was in store for you..."

"I can't be bought." Harry stated this without inflection. He glared at Voldemort, fighting to maintain his composure; in addition to snapping at him when he'd mentioned his living with the Dursleys, he'd almost crumbled when the other wizard had laughed at the thought of Harry chasing Wormtail through the forest; if it weren't for the fact that he hadn't caught him, Harry would have been tempted to laugh at that mental image as well. Voldemort looked at him now.

"I am not expecting anything, Harry. And you do not even have to accept what I am offering. If you do not wish to change anything in the past, to create a new future, you can just watch events unfold as they did the first time, watch your mother--and sister--die saving your life. Afterward, you will simply find yourself back at the train station as though nothing had occurred. You will take the train to school, and you will not hear from me for a while..."

"For a while?"

"Well, I fully intend to try to do *something* for you. Surely there is something I can do, something that will show you the benefits of being with me, instead of Dumbledore. If we do not find that something today, I am sure we will find it sometime. And even if you accept my gift today, that will not oblige you to reciprocate and give me what I want. I feel that if you, all people, choose to join me, it should be completely voluntary. It would have so much more meaning. Interesting word, *voluntary*. It means *of your own will, of your own volition...your own intentions being paramount, not anyone else's...*"

"I know what it means," Harry said, trying unsuccessfully to keep a snarl out of his voice; he didn't like it when his uncle spoke to him patronizingly, and he didn't like Voldemort doing it either.

"Please just give it a try, Harry." Voldemort had said *please* to him! "As I said, you don't have to decide yet. Let me explain how it will work: We will put the tips of our wands together and say together, *Tempus bonae voluntatis*. While we do so, I will think of how I would like nothing better than not to have killed your mother, and you will also think of how you would like nothing better than for me not to have killed your mother. We must both want this, or it will not work. This places you under no obligation to me. You have my word. Do you want to at least try?"

He looked odd to Harry, almost pleading and hopeful. Harry frowned, then looked down at the photo of his mother, her face looking odd through the cracked glass. He thought of Dumbledore and what he would say about such a spell. Could it be possible? Had Dumbledore told him he couldn't

change past events because it really couldn't be done, or was it just that Dumbledore thought it *shouldn't* be done?

Harry walked toward Voldemort, stepping over fallen stones overgrown with ivy where the back wall of the kitchen addition had once stood. He came very close to him, trying not to shake. "Why should I trust you?" he said softly, with narrowed eyes. The dark wizard tilted his head quizzically and raised his brows.

"How easy would it have been for me to kill you at the train station? Or to kill your friends? I could have brought you here and put the Cruciatius Curse on you until your brain seeped out of your ears. But I did not. As I said, I have learned from Malfoy's mistakes. Despite the handful of recruits his methods netted us, I feel that it is true that--how does that go? *You catch more flies with honey.* I think you will find that I have only your best interests at heart here, Harry. Why should you trust me?

Because we have been talking all this time, both here and at the station, and you're still alive *to talk to me. That is why you should trust me.*"

Harry kept his eyes narrowed and his wand trained on the other wizard. The silence hung between them for what seemed forever. He resisted the urge to yawn. *So tired, so tired.* "How do we do it?" he said finally, spitting the words out quickly, before he lost his nerve.

He wished Voldemort had done *anything* other than what he did next: he smiled more broadly than he had yet done, making Harry grimace. He struggled to return his face to normal, to not look completely revolted by the sight of that unnatural smile.

"As I already said, we say *Tempus bonae voluntatis* with our wand tips together, and we both think--"

"Yeah, yeah. I remember." He stifled another yawn, his eyes watering from the effort. How many years had he wished that his parents hadn't been killed by Voldemort? Ever since he'd first found out they hadn't perished in a car accident, when he was eleven. *His mother.* In his mind, he focused on the photo he'd just seen on the dresser. *Mum,* he thought. *Mum.*

Voldemort held his wand out and put the tip to Harry's extended wand. He looked at Harry with what seemed to be concern. "Ready, Harry? Are you thinking of your mother?"

He nodded, feeling a shiver run through him as the wand tips touched. He saw the dark wizard open his mouth and he too began to speak, saying the unfamiliar words, thinking of his mother, remembering seeing her dead form being held by Snape, when he'd been in the Pensieve....

He took a deep breath.

"Tempus bonae voluntatis!"

They said the words simultaneously. Harry felt his wand vibrating; he struggled to hold it still, and he could see that the older wizard was having difficulty with this as well. Did Voldemort know exactly what to expect? Harry wondered. Theirs were the only two wands in the world that had cores from Fawkes the phoenix's tail feathers. There were no other wands in existence with the same core. Two other wizards could try this and it might not be as effective, if their wands weren't brothers. Harry kept

telling himself, *I don't have to change anything, but if this wrong is to be righted...*

Harry felt himself tumbling through darkness again, but thankfully, there was no sickening hook behind his navel this time. Then he felt solid earth beneath his feet again. It was still very dark, but it was not the darkness of magical oblivion, of traveling by Portkey or going from thought to thought in someone's Pensieve. It was only the mundane dark of an autumn night. He looked up and saw a sky crowded with stars and turned to the dark wizard, the question clear on his face.

"If the spell worked as it should," Voldemort said quietly, "we are in the same place we were before, but on Halloween night, 1981. The spell took us to a time when the wrong could be righted. But it cannot take those casting the spell to a particular *place*. That is why I needed to bring you here by Portkey."

Halloween night, 1981. Not just watching someone's memory of it, but *actually there*. No--*then*. Harry turned back to the house. He was looking at the intact kitchen door; he moved to the left so he could look through the kitchen window, over the sink. He couldn't get too close because of the geranium-filled window box. He saw, for the second time in his life, the cozy, warmly lit house where he'd lived until his parents' death.

The kitchen had a homely, orderly air of comfort. There were washed dishes drying in a rack next to the sink; the wood of the dresser glowed gold in the light of the lamps sitting on it, and the lamplight glinted off the blue-and-white plates propped on the hutch, the teacups hanging on hooks. Neatly stacked cookbooks and framed pictures were on the counter of the dresser, next to the lamps; Harry saw the framed picture he'd been looking at minutes before. A wooden high chair was at the end of the table instead of a regular chair. The teapot he'd found just minutes before under the tangle of vines was sitting on the table, just where it would still be fifteen years later. The lid was off and there was steam rising from it. It appeared that his parents were waiting for the tea to steep. Couldn't they speed it up with magic? he wondered. Maybe they thought it tasted better this way. No one was in the kitchen save a substantial brown owl in a large cage that hung near the stove. The bird was preening, looking very proud of its beautiful plumage. The cage door was open and the window next to the stove was also open, allowing the bird to come and go at will. It would probably leave soon to do its nightly hunting. Harry wished he could remember its name.

He moved around to the side of the house where the living room was, and peered into one of the high windows flanking the fireplace. From being in the Pensieve, he remembered that these windows were above bookcases built-in next to the chimney breast; his view was partially obscured by books and knick-knacks on the top shelf. His parents were relaxing after (presumably) putting their baby in his cot for the night. *Me*, Harry corrected his thoughts; they've already put *me* to bed for the night...

The light from a cozy fire was making their skin glow. Some lamps on tables, possibly magical, possibly just burning lamp-oil, also lent a rosiness to the comfortable room. The door to the nursery was closed. He

gazed hungrily at his parents. They were sitting opposite each other. His mother was stretched out on the couch, reading a book, her hand laid protectively on her slightly rounded, pregnant belly, probably unconsciously. She was wearing a nightdress but no dressing gown; her red hair looked very dark in the firelight and lamplight. His father was in an armchair with his slippered feet propped up on an ottoman, the firelight glinting off his glasses. His hair still stuck up at the back of his head, as Harry had first seen it in the Mirror of Erised. He appeared to be doing a crossword puzzle with a quill, a familiar look of concentration on his face. Harry recognized the distinct parchment of the *Daily Prophet*. They had a wicked crossword, he remembered, which could change while you were doing it if you took too long. His father appeared to be working it rather fast, so perhaps he would avoid that fate. If so, Harry thought grimly, it might be the last good thing that happened to his father...

Harry wondered for a moment how he could be looking in the window at his parents if they were protected by the Fidelius Charm, but then he realized that he *knew* they were there, it was just as if he'd been told by the Secret Keeper; and in a way, he had, years in the future now.

He stepped back from the window, turning to the dark wizard. Somehow, he'd stopped treating him with mistrust, worrying about where he was looking and what he was doing every second. Perhaps if he appeared to trust him, he would believe that Harry really *did* trust him, and think he was winning him over. The problem was, Harry had to keep reminding himself that it was an act, that he didn't really trust him, he was just trying to make him *think* he did. Somewhere, deep inside, he really *wanted* to believe that Voldemort wanted the best for him, that what had happened this night could be changed...

"I can't save them both?" he whispered desperately, his heart aching. The other wizard shook his head grimly. He looked at his father through the window again. "I don't want to see him die," Harry said, his voice catching. "How long do we have to wait?"

The older man looked at the sky. "Not long now." His answer was terse and quiet. Harry shivered; it was a cold night. Smoke billowed from the stone chimney, hinting at the warmth and comfort inside the modest house. Harry's heart was beating faster and faster...

"Come here," Voldemort said to him, going to one of the large trees in the front garden. "We cannot be seen. This tree and rose bush will do nicely." This reminded Harry of using the Time Turner; he and Hermione were desperate not to be seen by their earlier selves. But he'd seen himself after all, fending off the dementors with the stag-shaped Patronus, and he'd thought it was his father. Harry ran back to look at his father one last time, trying to memorize every detail, before going to the corner of the garden.

Voldemort's thin figure was adequately hidden by the tree trunk, while Harry crouched behind a rose bush, trying not to get stuck by the thorns. He felt more than a bit ridiculous for a moment, hiding in his own front garden with the wizard who had killed his parents, waiting for him to show up and try kill them. If the situation weren't so dire, he'd have laughed.

He wasn't sure how long they'd been waiting when they heard a scream; his mother. The then-Voldemort must have Apparated right into the house. He heard his father shout something, including his mother's name and his name. He hung on the sound of his father's voice crying out, "Lily!" and "Harry!" He remembered hearing his father's voice when he had gotten too near the dementors...

His mother flung open the front door then, running into the garden barefoot, her son in her arms, crying piteously. She shivered in her nightdress. It was harder to tell now that she was pregnant, through the voluminous fabric. Baby Harry was crying non-stop. Then he heard a scream, a *man* screaming, and he tried to stop up his ears with his fingers. That was his father. *Oh god*, that was his father being tortured, and he'd done nothing to stop it...

He stared at his mother now. She had stopped, turned in anguish when she heard her husband cry out, clutching her baby to her breast. Could he do it? Could he just watch her die, do nothing, as Voldemort had said? A better question was, perhaps, could he *prevent* her death? As of this moment, it hadn't happened...

A flash of blindingly bright green light in the front window...a sound of speeding death...and Harry knew his father was gone. He felt the tears rolling down his cheeks but did nothing about the wetness. She would be next...unless he did something...

She turned at the sound of the death curse. Next came a deafening explosion, and Harry actually saw the roof fly into the air, saw stones and glass fly sideways out of the living room...He was doing his best to make James Potter's death quite a spectacular affair, Harry thought. The front façade of the house was still intact. Then-Voldemort was also not hurt by the assault he'd made on the house. He was through the door in a trice, not the least bit slowed down. Harry could see flames behind him now. A *fire!* Had he killed his father and then left his body to burn? Perhaps one of the lamps had been knocked over. Harry hadn't been focused on anything but Snape holding his dead mother when he'd been in the Pensieve. There could have been a fire...but then again, if *Snape* hadn't noticed it, it wouldn't be a memory of his, and it wouldn't make it into the Pensieve. Perhaps Snape had also not remembered his mother being pregnant. The Pensieve's contents were only the past as one imperfect person perceived it. It could be, he supposed that *he* was the one who hadn't noticed it...

"*Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!*" his mother cried as her husband's murderer approached her menacingly. Harry's hair rose on the back of his neck; he was finally *seeing* her say what he'd *heard* her saying in his head when the dementors had come onto the Quidditch pitch, and he'd fallen down, down...

"*Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside now...*" the eerie voice carried across the garden to Harry's hiding place. She sank to her knees, unable to Apparate to safety without leaving her child behind, knowing her husband was already dead. She shook her head, clutching baby Harry.

Harry knew what was coming next; he'd heard it in his head before. *Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead--*

"Not Harry--" she repeated tearfully. Harry couldn't see straight; Voldemort was going to do it, he was going to kill her. Harry couldn't bear it, he couldn't *not* do something...

He pointed his wand at her, saying, "*Imperio!*" forcefully but as quietly as he could, and thought at her, *Do whatever is necessary to save us! Do something--anything! Don't die, mum! Don't die!*

He saw then-Voldemort look in his direction, and he ducked behind the rose bush, hoping that he hadn't been seen, hoping it would work. He had never thought to put the Imperius Curse on anyone for any reason; if he was ever found out, he would go to Azkaban; but he couldn't think of any other way to get her to do what he wanted. He still didn't know whether it had worked.

He waited for his mother to say the familiar words, ready to resign himself to history repeating itself. "Please, no," she said, just as she had before. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears choking him, waiting to hear the *take me, kill me instead...*

But she didn't say those words. He heard her, heard her say the words that would save her life, and by extension, his sister's life. "*All right!*" she cried tearfully. "All right...I'll do it..."

"Do what?" came the soft voice. Harry dared to raise his head again; he saw that then-Voldemort's attention was no longer being directed toward the rose bush.

"I'll--I'll raise him to be your servant." His mother's voice was cold and mechanical-sounding, not at all like the firebrand young woman he'd seen in Snape's Pensieve. She'd done it, she'd said the words he wanted to hear. She didn't have to mean them, as Snape had told her. Just say them.

But then the dark wizard reached out and touched the baby on the forehead with his wand and muttered something he could not hear. His mother looked alarmed.

"What--?"

"Insurance," he answered before she could finish the question. "An invisible mark of ownership. Very well; you have made me a promise. You can believe that I will hold you to it. Do not make me sorry for giving you and the boy this chance." The cold voice hung on the air.

"No, no," she repeated, shaking her head, rocking the baby close to her and crying over him. Harry blinked, and the dark wizard was gone; he had Disapparated. His mother knelt on the path to her own front door, her house burning, her husband dead, rocking her baby and crying louder and louder. From behind him, Harry heard pounding footsteps; someone was running toward the house. But just as Harry turned to see who it was, the world started slipping away from him.

This was not like the trip through time, or traveling by Portkey or Floo powder, or being in a Pensieve. He felt like his breath was being sucked out of him; his joints hurt, worse than when he did the Animagus

transfiguration. His very teeth and hair *hurt*, and he tumbled, tumbled, tumbled through blackest night for what seemed a very long time...

* * * * *

Harry wasn't sure how long he had been unconscious. His eyes were still closed; the first evidence he had that he was awake was that he heard someone calling his name.

"Haaar-reeeee!" It was a woman's voice, unfamiliar. She drew out his name, sounding like she had done this many times before. He braced himself, then opened his eyes. He immediately closed them again. *All right*, he thought. *I really need to get some sleep...*

He opened his eyes again to check to see whether he was still where he had been a moment before. He was. He was in an unfamiliar room, a large bedroom, and he was lying sideways on the large brass bed that was the centerpiece of it. Bright daylight streamed in through the leaded-glass windows and trees whose leaves were just beginning to be touched by color were visible outdoors. He stared round at the walls and furniture. Where was he?

His head hurt; he felt like thoughts trying to rise to the surface of his consciousness were being beaten back. *It's your bedroom, stupid*, was one thought. *Don't be ridiculous*, was another. Harry stood and went to a desk next to the fireplace; the mantel was a good five feet off the ground, and suddenly he received a very vivid mental picture...

"Mummy! I want us to buy this house! Look, I can stand in the fireplace! I want this to be my room!"

His mother smiled at him indulgently, tall and beautiful as ever. "Rather a grand room for such a little boy..."

"Please Mummy? I promise to keep it neat myself..."

"Oh really?" She looked amused. "Well, since you're the eldest, I suppose we can justify you getting this room..."

He grinned and ran to his mother, and she swept him up into her arms; he remembered the scent of her hair in his nose, the feeling of her holding him close to her...

He shook his head to clear it. He was imagining both this room and having his mother raise him...*I will resume sleeping eight hours a night again if I have to get a sleeping draught from Pomfrey every evening*. He closed his eyes again, then opened them. Nothing had changed.

He turned to the desk, which was on the messy side. Books and parchments and quills and ink bottles were scattered across it. A Quidditch calendar hung on the wall above the desk. This month's team was the Holyhead Harpies, which was populated entirely by witches. The players were flying about in the picture above the grid of days, dark green robes fluttering behind them, each with a golden talon upon the chest. It was a

Welsh team, he knew. He had another memory of being younger again, but not as young as before, begging for tickets to a Harpies game... Harry shook his head again. He felt faint. He braced himself on the desktop and stared at the calendar. *September 1996*, it read. Sunday the first was circled. *Moving back to school* was written here in green ink. Yes, Harry thought, it *is* September first of 1996, but what the hell am I doing here? Where am I?

There was a copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* on the desk, looking like it had been chewed by one of said beasts. He flipped it open and read on the inside, "Property of Harry Potter." He closed the book again. Except for appearing a little more worn than he remembered it, this seemed to be his book. Some things hadn't changed. Then he looked down at his body and got a shock.

His eyes seemed to be further from the ground than he remembered. It was subtle, but he could feel it. He turned around; on the opposite wall there was a wardrobe with a mirror on the door, and he went to stand before it, getting the biggest shock of his life.

He was clearly taller, and definitely thinner. He was wearing jeans and a dark green T-shirt and what looked like black hiking boots. His Adam's apple looked more prominent than he remembered; his neck was downright *bony*. Gone were the muscles he'd developed over two summers of gardening and a year of running and other exercise. Gone was his summer tan. He was parchment-colored and frankly, he thought, sickly-looking. His eyes were as green as ever, and his hair looked as his father's had, standing up on his head, especially in back, as though Parvati had never cut his hair and he hadn't been maintaining the haircut using his Animagus training. He'd noticed when he'd first seen James Potter in the Mirror of Erised that the only differences between them were his eye color (which was never going to change), his height (which he seemed to have in abundance now), and his scar. Thinking of his scar, he lifted the hair off his forehead to glance at it and received yet another shock.

He had no scar.

He brought his face within an inch of the glass and searched the skin surface with his eyes, then his fingers; there was no trace of a scar ever having been on his forehead.

"Take a picture!" the mirror snapped at him suddenly. "It'll last longer!" Harry jumped back from the wardrobe and looked down at himself again, then around the room. He walked back to the mantel; there were some framed photos there, wizarding photos. A picture of him with a dark-haired girl of about eleven, both being fitted for robes in Madam Malkin's shop, looking quite impatient (his photo-self kept tapping his foot); he looked like he was roughly thirteen. Her eyes were as green as his. Her features though...something about them was very familiar...

Another photo made him stop and stare. It was him and the girl again, with a third person: *Draco Malfoy*. They looked inseparable, just like him and Ron and Hermione. The girl was between the two of them, her arms around each of them, and their arms around her shoulders. They were all

laughing, their hair moving in a breeze, and all of them wore Hogwarts robes.

His head started to ache. *What have I done?* his mind demanded. *Have I done what I think I've done?*

But he couldn't continue thinking about this because suddenly, the girl was *there*, in the doorway of his bedroom! *His bedroom.* He hadn't even noticed that the door was open.

"Harry!" she hissed at him. Her hair wasn't as dark as his, he could see now, and where the sun hit it there were reddish highlights. She was as pale as he was and had a light sprinkling of tan freckles over her nose.

"Better finish packing, if you know what's good for you! Mum's on the warpath!"

She disappeared from the doorway again. She'd been wearing black Hogwarts robes, as in the photo on his mantel, but now she looked around fourteen. Just starting to be womanly, but still with a certain childishness about her face. The photo of the three of them couldn't have been taken all that long ago, he decided.

"All right, Jamie," he called after her. "Thanks for the heads up." Jamie. The name had just popped into his brain and he'd said it without a thought. Her name was Jamie, and she was his sister.

Sister.

The sister who would have died with his mother if he hadn't--

"Harry!"

His mother stood now in the doorway to his room. He regarded the stern expression on her face, swallowing.

"Heads up? Heads up on what?" She looked at him suspiciously. He fought the urge to run to her, throw his arms around her and hold on for dear life. *She was alive!* She was alive and well and she'd raised him for the past fifteen years, and raised his sister...

"Oh, nothing. I'm nearly done. I've got to put some things in my trunk from my desk and that'll be it."

"Don't forget anything. We can't be constantly running back here this time; we managed to get tenants who are moving in the day after tomorrow, until mid-December. They won't want a forgetful teenage boy constantly traipsing through, collecting every little Quidditch trinket he forgot to take to school..."

He blinked, staring at her, unable to take his eyes off her. "Yes, mum." Then she was gone, her deep purple robes swirling around her. He dashed to the door; he watched her walk away, and as she did so, she called over her shoulder, "And when you're done, go downstairs and help your father put the china into storage if he isn't done yet."

"Yes, mum," he said again, as though nothing were wrong, as though he hadn't just landed precipitously in a life completely alien from the life to which he was accustomed. An additional fifteen years of living was now trying to cram itself into his brain, and he was having difficulty accessing all of the information he needed. Some things simply came to him when he needed them, such as his sister's name, but other things eluded him. *Father?* I have a father? Did my dad survive after all?

No, his brain immediately told him. *It's not James Potter...*

Ah, he thought. Yes. She remarried. Of course.

Suddenly he glanced at his wrist; he didn't have a watch. He looked around his room, then his eyes went back to the mantel, where there was a carriage clock that showed the phases of the moon.

It was almost one o'clock! On September first! He'd missed the Hogwarts Express...and yet, his mother didn't seem at all concerned. His sister (he was still getting used to that word) didn't either. He strode over to the bay window; there was a window seat there, and he pictured himself spending many happy, peaceful hours there immersed in his favorite books... He sat on the tapestry-covered cushion and looked up and down the street he lived on, for it turned out that his room was in the front of the house.

Looking to his left he saw a wall marking the end of the street and the beginning of a field that didn't appear to be part of a farm, as it wasn't plowed. Looking to his right, he saw...

The High Street in Hogsmeade.

He lived in Hogsmeade! Of course...he remembered house hunting again, and he and Jamie running up and down the large stairs in the front hall when they were very young...And that explained why they weren't taking the train to school. They lived in Hogsmeade. He looked out the window again, seeing all the familiar landmarks: The Three Broomsticks, the village hall, Honeyduke's...and then he realized that if his house was at the end of the High Street...

He remembered, as if in a dream, Ginny telling him about Percy at his birthday party: *He bought a house in Hogsmeade, that big old pile at the end of the High Street that's been for sale for ages.* That "big old pile" was evidently his home! He grinned, looking around his room again, really appreciating it this time. In *this* life, he had never lived for ten years in a cupboard under the stairs, he had never been starved (that probably account for his being taller) and he had *always* known he was a wizard! He put his hand to his forehead again. He didn't have a scar. Voldemort had not tried to kill him, and Voldemort had not killed his mother. He'd actually been telling the truth; he wanted to right that wrong. But why? What would he gain by it? But suddenly, Harry knew what Voldemort had to gain: he would not be stripped of his powers, he would not spend over thirteen years trying to get his body back...Harry shuddered, wondering what had resulted from that. He knew that there had been great rejoicing in the wizarding world when Voldemort fell...If he had never fallen, what was the wizarding world like?

Harry closed his eyes, trying to dredge up some more memories of this life. *I'm not famous*, he realized. *I'm just a sixth-year Hogwarts student, like any other student. I've never lived with the Dursleys, or even--* he suddenly realized *--met them.* He opened his eyes. That meant Dudley was probably still alive! Granted, he was also probably an overweight, unbearable git, but he hadn't died because of Harry! He closed his eyes and thought some more. He found himself getting more and more optimistic about this new life, despite the fact it didn't include the fall of Voldemort.

The Chamber of Secrets was not opened during my second year, and Ginny was never manipulated by Lucius Malfoy and the memory of Tom Riddle...

There was no Triwizard Tournament; last year Cedric Diggory was Head Boy and now he works with his dad at the Ministry of Magic...

My mum was able to tell Dumbledore about Peter Pettigrew being the Secret Keeper who betrayed them, and Pettigrew was tracked down, given the dementor's kiss and sent to prison...

Sirius Black never went to Azkaban...

Harry opened his eyes, grinning. He'd not only saved his mother's life, and his sister's; he'd saved Dudley's, and Cedric's, and he'd spared Sirius twelve years of imprisonment for something he didn't do! He remembered that Pettigrew was caught at the house of some large wizarding family...he couldn't remember the name now...and he'd never killed that street full of Muggles that Sirius had been blamed for. So all of those people were alive, too!

Ha! to you, Voldemort! he thought. You thought you were tricking me, you knew I couldn't just watch my mother die...but the joke's on you!

Whatever doubts he might have had about saving his mother's life, they evaporated as he looked out again at the bustling High Street, smiling, an unfamiliar happiness welling up in his chest as he remembered tidbits about what it was like to grow up in Hogsmeade...

"Harry!"

He turned to his bedroom door again, startled. Two pale, dark-haired, dark-eyed boys were standing there. They were around twelve-years-old and identical down to the small brown mole each had in the middle of his left cheek. He was uncertain which boy had spoken.

"What?" he said, as naturally as if he knew the boys.

The one on the left spoke now. "Mum said to check that you weren't daydreaming. What's your price?"

"What?" he said again. Brothers? Did he have brothers? And twins, no less.

"Your price," the other boy said. "For not telling her that you were in fact daydreaming."

He strode quickly to his desk, where his wand was sitting. He picked it up quickly and pointed it at them. "Your reward for not telling will be *not* getting hexed to smell like rotten cabbages so no one will come near you for the next month," he snarled. At the same time, he thought, *Is that any way to treat my little brothers? I have little brothers!*

But his brain from his old life was doing battle with the brain from this one. *Stuart and Simon are always trying to get me into trouble...* Stuart and Simon. Usually Stu and Si. Second years. Born two years after Jamie, who's a fourth year. Facts came floating to the surface from a deep well of information that was steadily becoming easier and easier to access.

"Mum!" one of the boys yelled now. Which one was it? he wondered, then remembered that he'd never been able to tell them apart. Only his mother could. They ran down the corridor in the direction his mother had gone.

Rats! He glanced at the messy desk, and the open trunk at the foot of his

bed. He started waving his wand, moving articles from the desk into the trunk so quickly that he was sure he'd probably put more than a few things in that he didn't need, since the surface of the desk was now completely empty. He also put in everything from the mantel except the carriage clock, including some birthday cards he evidently was still displaying. He checked his wardrobe and the drawers of a dresser next to his bed, and nothing was left that could be worn in the autumn or winter, just summer clothes. He closed and locked his trunk and went to his door, running straight into his formidable mother.

She stood with crossed arms and a frown, causing vertical lines to appear between her eyebrows. Her bright green eyes glittered. He stepped back, swallowing.

"All done packing, mum. I was just about to help dad with the china like you said."

She looked at him doubtfully; he squirmed, hating the idea of lying to his mother as much as he hated the thought of her not trusting him. Finally, her face relaxed and she let him pass. "All right. But I don't want to hear about you threatening to hex your brothers again, do you hear me? And don't forget; once school starts, if you get caught at that, you'll lose house points."

"Yes, ma'am," he said docilely, his lips drawn into a line as he attempted to seem as noncombative as possible. She retreated back down the corridor toward what he assumed was his parents' bedroom. After she'd passed, Stu and Si leaned out of their bedroom doors, on opposite sides of the corridor in the same direction his mother had gone, and both stuck their tongues out at Harry and crossed their eyes, looking very silly. Harry stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes back, although he knew that if his mother caught him, he'd be the one to get an earful, since he was sixteen, and the eldest...

I'm not an only child. I'm the eldest. He turned to go down the broad stairs when the sound of someone humming off-key caught his attention. He continued down the corridor past the stairs, coming to his sister's bedroom. The door was slightly ajar, and he saw through the crack that she was packing her trunk still. She was holding a framed picture identical to the one that had been on Harry's mantel, the two of them with Draco Malfoy. *Three troublemakers*, he remembered his mother calling them affectionately. Jamie paused for a moment and put her finger on the image of Draco, a dreamy expression on her face. She shook herself and wrapped the framed picture in a wizarding robe, to protect it, stuffing it in the trunk. Does my sister have a crush on my best friend? He laughed to himself. Best friend. Hadn't he just said to--someone--that Malfoy was now going to be his best friend? He had no idea how prophetic he was being...

Suddenly a very vivid memory rose up in his mind, and he saw himself and Draco Malfoy and his sister when they were eleven and she was nine, eating ice cream cones at an outdoor table at Florean Fortescue's place in Diagon Alley...

Jamie was frowning at her ice cream as she licked methodically around the sides. Harry and Draco were chatting excitedly about getting their supplies to start their first year of Hogwarts.

"Have you gotten your wand yet?" Draco asked him.

"Not yet. Mum's at the apothecary, getting my potions stuff. After we're done here, I think she said it's robes next..."

"Good! When my dad comes back we're getting robes, too. Let's make sure we get identical ones."

"Right!" Harry agreed, taking a bite of his chocolate macadamia ice cream that made his teeth hurt. "I just wish we could take our brooms..."

"Too right! "It's not fair, not letting first years have brooms...I mean, we've been flying for ages. We know what we're doing." Draco started nibbling at his cone.

"I just hope you do something about your snoring..."

Draco hit Harry on the arm playfully. "My snoring--"

"Yeah. If we're going to be living in the same dorm for seven years..."

"You scared the house elves with your snoring the last time you slept at my house," Draco laughed, and Harry laughed along. They quieted for a minute to continue eating their ice cream cones. Then Harry spoke into the silence.

"I'm glad your dad decided to send you to the village school a few years ago," he said softly, unable to imagine life without his best friend.

"Me too. Thank goodness for the 'labor shortage.' I was going along for months without any tutors before Dad finally gave in on the school thing."

Jamie finished her cone and began cleaning her fingers daintily, and Harry noticed that there were tears in her eyes. He looked at her with concern.

"You okay, James?"

She threw her napkin onto the table with disgust. "Oh, it's all right for you. You both get to go off to live up at the castle, and you get to have wands and learn spells--while I'll be stuck back in the village reciting Latin conjugations and declensions!"

"But Jamie," Draco said, putting his hand on hers, "you'll be a first year soon. In no time! You'll see...And you've still got the twins..."

She made a face. "The twins--ha!" Harry saw her angrily swipe some tears from the corners of their eyes. He felt a funny twisting in his stomach. Poor Jamie...

"Anyway," she said with a catch in her voice, "what makes you think you're both going to be in the same house?"

Harry and Draco stopped and stared at each other. "W--why?" Draco said to her. "You don't think we'll be put in the same house?"

She shrugged. "Well our mum and dad were both in Gryffindor, and I don't know about your mum Draco, but I know your dad was in Slytherin."

Harry and Draco looked at each other again. "It doesn't always go that way, James," Harry said to her. "Plenty of families have people from different houses. Parents, kids, brothers and sisters. Just 'cause someone in your family was in a particular house doesn't mean you're going to be." Harry tried to sound surer about this than he felt. What if they weren't in the same house?

"What if we're not in the same house?" Draco said quietly now, voicing Harry's fears. Harry looked down, frowning, then up again.

"Why should it matter? We'll still be friends. Why wouldn't we be?"

The question hung in the air between them. After an uncomfortable silence, Draco started to open his mouth, but Jamie cut him off. "I'll tell you why you might not be. You spend all your time with your housemates for seven years. You sit in all your classes with your housemates in the same year--and you live with the housemates in your year. And then there's the common room for each house. And the house table in the Great Hall. And then there's the Quidditch teams...I mean, if you're in different houses, your teams will

be playing against each other. You won't be supporting the same team..."

"Hold it, hold it," Harry said, trying to be the voice of reason. "Just because mum and dad were in Gryffindor doesn't mean I'm going to be, and just because Draco's dad was in Slytherin doesn't mean he's going to be. I mean--we could both be in Ravenclaw."

Jamie burst out laughing, quickly covering her mouth, her eyes merry. Draco looked rather put out. "What's so funny?" he demanded. She removed her hand from her mouth.

"With your marks? Not just you, Draco. I mean Harry, too."

"All right," Harry said, "Hufflepuff then."

She laughed again. "You two are not exactly what you'd call hard workers. Face it, either you'll both be in Gryffindor, you'll both be in Slytherin, or it'll be one of you in each."

Harry looked at Draco, then at his sister. "Way to cheer us up, James. Thanks a lot."

She started to tear up again. "Well, why not spread the misery around? I'm going to bloody well miss the pair of you..."

"Jamie Rose Potter! Language!" Harry found it hard not to laugh while saying this.

"Oh, shut up, Harry. You've heard me say 'bloody' before. If mum knew some of the language you use..."

Harry laughed outright now. "She'd probably hex me so I could only talk when I want food or something. You'd better exercise better self-control by the time you get to Hogwarts, though. If a prefect hears you talking like that you could lose points for your house."

"Oh, such rubbish! Prefects probably use the worst language, especially when they're reaming out grotty little first years..."

Harry reached out and poked her in the side, making her erupt into hysterical giggles.

"Harry!" You know what mum said about tickling me--" but he poked her again and she was laughing so hard she couldn't go on talking.

"You won't have me to tickle you for much longer. Enjoy it while you can," he said, continuing the tickling for another half-minute, but then stopping when he saw she was no longer laughing but looking at him very seriously.

"I know," she said, swallowing. She extended her arms and put a hand on each of their arms, on the small cafe table. "I'll miss you both."

The boys covered her hands with their own. "We'll send you owls all the time," Draco promised, and Harry agreed with him, nodding solemnly.

"All the time."

Harry turned away from his sister's door and went back to the stairs. He looked around at the front hall, with its grand tapestries and floor-to-ceiling paneling and coffered ceiling. He was still coming to terms with the fact that the last fifteen years of his life had *never happened*. Or rather, they had happened completely differently. He worried about one thing: could he continue to remember his old life, could he hold the memories of two different fifteen-year-periods in his head at the same time? He was starting to get the impression that every time he pulled up a memory of this life, this time, he was losing something from that other life.

He thought of his other life, and all of the things that were left undone. Where was Snape? Perhaps he shouldn't worry. He was probably fine in this life. And if he wasn't all right in that other time, perhaps that was yet another person whose life was saved by his having saved his mother. He had already remembered that Pettigrew had been punished for betraying his parents, and that Sirius had never been imprisoned.

But then he started doubting again. What if he was dreaming? What if his not sleeping had led to this, his brain forcing him to dream whenever and wherever it could manage it, and this was the dream it came up with? He pinched his own left arm painfully, viciously squeezing the skin between the fingers of his right hand, then rubbed the reddened skin, wincing and cursing under his breath. If it was a dream it was an *extremely* realistic one.

He reached the foot of the stairs and walked forward, not having to think consciously about where to find the dining room. He turned left and entered the huge room, with its enormous banqueting table with sixteen chairs around it and its crystal chandelier with dozens of candles. He noticed that there was a greeting card someone had left on the mantel. He crossed the room to look at it.

There was a beautiful, lacy heart on the front. It looked like a Valentine. Had it been sitting here since February? Harry opened it. There wasn't a printed message inside, only a hand-written one. *Happy Anniversary. For Lily, my love. S.*

S.

His stepfather. He remembered that Sirius hadn't gone to prison in this life, and his heart leapt into his throat. He also remembered Sirius telling him that he had made a pass at his mother once, when they were in school, and saying to Snape, "We were all in love with her." He thought about his brothers' coloring, the dark hair and eyes, overlaid on his mother's features. He couldn't stop a huge smile from splitting his face as he went to the door to the left of the mantel, which he knew somehow would lead him to the butler's pantry, where the china was.

His mother had married Sirius! He couldn't believe how he just kept discovering better and better things about this life! Who knew that the world would be so much better merely by his mother living? Who knew what a difference one person made? And how different everything might be? Then he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw his stepfather.

It was *not* Sirius Black.

Chapter Four

The World As We Know It

Harry looked at his stepfather, Severus Snape, standing in the butler's pantry, smiling at him. He should have realized. Those pounding footsteps he'd heard on Halloween night...Harry and Hermione had seen it happen, in the Pensieve. Snape and Barty Crouch, Jr. had Apparated to the moors where Harry had been in the present day, where the clock Portkey had taken him, and after Crouch had put the Cruciatus Curse on Snape, he'd disarmed Crouch and run down into the hollow, hearing along the way the eerie sound of Voldemort's curse rebounding off baby Harry, reducing the dark wizard to less than spirit...

He and Hermione had seen Snape run into the garden, take his dead mother's body in his arms and weep over her, while the Boy Who Lived stood nearby in his nappy, finger in his mouth and blood running down his face from his new scar, crying like any other baby on the planet.

But *this time*, Harry reflected, Snape must have found his mother alive, weeping over her husband's death. She would have been able to tell Snape immediately that Peter Pettigrew had betrayed them, not Sirius...And now Severus Snape was his stepfather. He turned to Harry now, looking younger and happier than the last time Harry had seen him; his hair was cut short and his beard was closely trimmed; he gave Harry a genuine smile when he turned and saw him, the first Harry ever remembered getting from him.

"She sent you down to help me, eh?" Harry nodded and his stepfather *winked* at him conspiratorially, then shook his head. "Her grandmother's china," he held up one teacup as an example. "You'd think one of us

couldn't just wave a wand to fix it if it broke, but she says she'd still know that it had been broken to begin with, and it just wouldn't be the same..."

He sighed and looked at Harry. Harry realized now that his brothers' coloring was from him, not Sirius, and although he was slightly disappointed, he remembered seeing Snape and his mother in the Pensieve, when they were sixteen. They had seemed to be in love at the time. And he was there for her right after the attack that Halloween night...

His mother tried to get his hair to lie down, but it never would. She gave up and instead tried to get Jamie to sit still to have her dark curls brushed and gathered together into a ribbon at her crown. He was only three-and-a-half, and his sister was nearly two years old. His mother was dressed in beautiful ivory-colored brocade robes with a red and gold braid running round the hem, down the front, and at the sleeves and collar. She wore lilies of the valley in her flaming hair and her emerald eyes shone with excitement.

"Come on, the pair of you... You'll be fine." Her voice had a nervous edge to it. Harry looked around the anteroom of the village hall, where they were waiting for their cue. His mother picked up Jamie and carried her on her hip, and reached down with her other hand to hold his. They went to the center doors; some music started to play and unseen hands opened the doors. The hall had seats on either side of a central aisle, and the music seemed familiar. Trumpet music. His mother started to walk down the central aisle, carrying her daughter and accompanied by her son, walking toward Severus Snape, in very formal-looking deep green wizarding robes, standing at the front of the hall beside a smallish wizard wearing a bowler hat, holding a book in his hands. Lucius Malfoy stood next to Severus Snape. He was also dressed formally. Harry turned; he saw his godfather among the guests. He also saw Malfoy's wife, Narcissa, standing opposite her husband. She was his mother's attendant.

He let his mind wander during the ceremony, looking around the hall, finally seeing another boy about his age. He had silvery blond hair that had been severely slicked down on his head such that it didn't move at all when he did. When he saw Harry looking at him, he stuck out his tongue. Harry returned this, then realized he might be caught, and hastily pulled his tongue back into his mouth.

Very suddenly, it seemed, the ceremony was over and his mother and new stepfather were kissing, and the music was playing again, and they were walking back up the aisle, Jamie

on her hip still, her arm through her husband's, who was now Harry's stepfather. His stepfather held his hand gently, whispering to him as they walked down the aisle, "Do you mind me being your dad, Harry?"

He shook his head. He didn't remember his father. He knew this man, though, who was very, very tall and who often lifted him up to ride on his shoulders, and laughed at his mother's jokes, and told her jokes to make her laugh, and Harry knew that anyone who made his mother laugh instead of cry was all right, for when his mum said she was thinking of Harry's father, all she did was cry...

And then at the party afterward, he and his sister were given over to a woman the blond boy called Nanny Bella. The blond boy was already with her. Nanny Bella called him Draco. They had traveled by Portkey to a very grand mansion which the blond boy said was his home, and when they arrived in his room, it was filled with the most wondrous toys Harry had ever seen...He almost forgot that he was there because his mother had just gotten married again. He had the most wonderful afternoon and evening of his young life, playing in that well-equipped nursery with his new friend, Draco, and later being tucked into a large comfortable bed by the woman called Nanny Bella in a room he had all to himself, and being sung to sleep. He wasn't used to sleeping in a bed; usually he slept in a cot in the same room with his sister, who had her own cot. He snuggled down into the luxurious bed, listening to the singing, thinking about having a new father and a new friend, and wondering what the morrow would bring...

They finished packing away the china, his stepfather chatting easily to him about Quidditch. He was surprised to realize that not only did he *like* talking to Severus Snape like this, it felt completely natural, and there was a complete absence of tension between them, especially compared to the crackling in the air Harry had felt between him and his mother...

While he was talking to him, Harry gave automatic responses, realizing that when he *tried* to really think about retrieving information about this life it was more difficult than when he simply let the information rise to the surface of his consciousness. When they were done with the china, he walked with his stepfather through the dining room to the hall and stood at the bottom of the stairs. His dad--for he was now used to thinking of him this way--called to the others, "Time for lunch! We need to eat before the carriages arrive!"

Harry watched his sister and brothers thunder down the stairs, while their mother walked down with dignity, admonishing them merely with her aloof silence. They all went through the butler's pantry to the large old

kitchen, which had a huge cast-iron stove, walk-in fireplace, stone sink with long, slanting wooden drainboards, plate racks above that, and numerous ancient-looking dressers with a variety of food and crockery. The ceiling soared a good twenty feet above the brick floor, the heavy timbers dark with age and cooking smoke. A large tufted leather couch was pushed against the wall on one side of the hearth, a worn tapestry-covered wing chair was nearby with a foot stool. Even though it was the middle of the afternoon and the sun was glaringly bright outdoors, they needed to have a couple of dozen candles floating above the table to avoid eating in gloom.

Harry sat down at the oversized central work table with his family, his mind still reeling, although they clearly thought nothing of this simple family lunch in the enormous kitchen; nothing was new and different to *them*. Harry sat near the end of one of the long sides of the table; his sister was next to him and the twins opposite, while his parents sat at either end of the table. He looked down in confusion at the well-scrubbed table, which was completely devoid of food.

His mother calmly looked at her husband. "What do you think, Severus, just sandwiches and salad?" He nodded assent, his mother clapped her hands twice imperiously, and before he could process what was happening, a house-elf appeared with a loud *crack!* behind his chair and started putting plates heaped with sandwiches and large bowls of different salads in the middle of the table; he put individual plates and flatware and goblets at their places, moving almost too quickly to be seen. When the elf was at his place, Harry stopped him briefly by putting a hand on the small brown arm.

"Thanks, Tunny," he said to the surprised-looking elf, whose large amber eyes grew even larger. He disappeared with another loud *crack!* When he'd managed to get the elf to stand still momentarily, Harry could see that he was wearing a heavy canvas shopping bag with a picture of various fruits and vegetables on it (upside down, since there was a hole cut in the bottom for his head, and his arms were thrust through holes on the sides). The handles of the bag hung down below the elf's knees. It looked like he'd be hitting his lower legs against the handles with every step.

Harry looked up to find his family staring at him, and Jamie hissed under her breath, "What are you *doing*, Harry? Since when do you thank house elves?"

He had a sudden flash of being about ten, with Jamie only eight and the twins six, all four of them helping his mother make and decorate Christmas cookies, laughing as they all became covered in flour and red and green sparkling sugar (it changed colors as you ate the cookies). He remembered leaving the messy kitchen with his family and a plate of

hilarious-looking cookies, and seeing a small, irritated-looking elf in the shadows, waiting unobtrusively to clear up the mess...

He swallowed. He remembered from his *other* life that Dobby was completely overwhelmed when he turned up in Harry's bedroom on Privet Drive and Harry had asked him to sit on his bed; wizards *never* asked elves to *sit*.

"I, um--"

But his little brothers seemed to have decided to make up with him for having threatened to hex them earlier. "Good one, Har! He'll think you're barking mad--or he is!" one of them said, and they both gave identical guffaws. His mother looked singularly unamused. She shook out her napkin in what seemed a very pointed gesture, and after laying it carefully in her lap, she took a sandwich from the platter immediately in front of her and handed it to Harry, on her right, giving him that gimlet eye to which he was still not accustomed.

Right, he thought. We live in a house this size, of course we have house-elves. And of course witches and wizards don't *thank* elves for doing things...Boy, Hermione will really scream at me when she--

Hermione.

He remembered Boxing Day, trying to wrestle the cleaning flannels from the elves, giving them that speech, and then Hermione kissing him in the large Hogwarts kitchen, and Dobby being surprised when he saw them...

It was the first time he'd thought of her since waking up in this strange new life. Where was Hermione in his life? He wracked his brain, trying to remember her, but all he could picture was the Hermione in his old life. Why should that be? Maybe she's in Ravenclaw now, he thought, instead of Gryffindor...

"So," his stepfather said to his mother, "I understand there are going to be over twenty-five first-years today."

His mother raised her eyebrows. "That's the highest number in years. That would be a lot all at once. Has Minerva adjusted the schedule accordingly?"

He nodded. "It'll be fine...You only ever have two houses at a time in the dungeons, anyway. They can't overload you without adding work stations..."

Harry frowned while chewing his ham sandwich. *Potions dungeon?* Yes, his new brain responded. Mum is the Potions professor...

He looked at Snape out of the corner of his eye. *And he teaches too? What does he teach?*

"If she wants to give me all of the first years together for Dark Arts, there's nothing stopping her. I've tried reminding her that when she taught Transfiguration she only ever had *one* house and year at a time, but it just falls on deaf ears..." He frowned at his sandwich before taking a bite of it.

His wife sighed. "Of course, there wasn't a labor shortage then..."

Dark Arts. So Snape was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts at last. And he *had* once said to Harry that his mother was the most brilliant Potions student the school had ever seen. But what did his dad mean by "when she *taught* Transfiguration?"

"Minerva has her own way, Severus. Every headmaster or headmistress has to run the school as they see fit. She's under a lot of stress..."

Okay, thought Harry. McGonagall is the headmistress. So where's that leave Dumbledore? And who's teaching Transfiguration?

His head was starting to hurt again, but he decided against asking his mother the Potions professor for a headache remedy. He stood with the others when they had finished their sandwiches and salads and pumpkin juice and he started to carry his plate and goblet to the stone sink, when Jamie put her hand on his arm, saying softly, "*Stop it, Harry!*" He frowned at her, then looked down at the things in his hands and hastily replaced them on the table. He was doing it again. Some things were reflexive from this life, and some things were reflexive from his *other* life. He hoped he wouldn't get mixed up too often. *The house-elf will clear the table.*

He lagged behind the others as they left the kitchen, waiting for another sign of the elf whom he'd mortified earlier by offering thanks, but he was nowhere to be seen. Their trunks had mysteriously appeared in the front hall and the door was open. *How many elves do we have?* he wondered. Two horseless carriages from the school stood in the U-shaped drive before the house.

"Harry!" his mother said to him suddenly. He turned, automatically feeling guilty for no reason that immediately came to mind. Must be force of habit, he thought.

"*Where are your robes?*"

He frowned. "In my trunk, of course. I packed everything, I promise."

She stood with her arms crossed, one eyebrow raised, tapping her foot, clearly waiting for a different answer, and when she didn't get one, she

looked very pointedly at his clothes. *Oooooh*, thought Harry. Damn! I was supposed to keep one set of robes out to wear up to the castle...

Harry had the good grace to flush as he went to his trunk and retrieved some rather wrinkled school robes that had ended up crushed under the erstwhile contents of his desk. His mother could also see now that he'd put everything in without any regard for organization whatsoever. He'd seen her packing jobs; everything was so tight it never moved a millimeter during transport.

He shook out the robes; they smelled a bit like ink. Once he'd donned them, he tried to brush them down with his hands, but it still looked as though he'd slept in them. Added to that, he could see in the glass hanging near the front door that his hair was as unruly (and like his father's) as ever. He tried getting it to lie down with his hand, to no avail. His mother surveyed him critically, then gave an exasperated sigh and turned from him. Harry's stomach clenched within him, and what seemed like an old, familiar thought popped into his head.

There's just no pleasing her.

She was clearly giving up on him temporarily. His mother and stepfather now used their wands to levitate the trunks into the carriages, after which they all boarded. Severus Snape guided his sons into one carriage, while Harry's mother beckoned to him and his sister, and they climbed into the other one.

As they rode through the village of Hogsmeade, Harry looked at his mother and sister, sitting opposite him. He could see now that Jamie was his mother all over again, the same features and eyes, but with chestnut brown hair that was a combination of his father's and his mother's. His mother was no longer a delicate young girl, but a strong, handsome woman, and Harry seriously doubted that her students got away with anything--especially her own children.

He thought about lunch in the large old kitchen; something his mother said had disturbed him, something about twenty-five first years. *That number seems low*, he thought. And she'd said it was high. Why would she say that? But even as he pondered this, another childhood memory came roaring back, as though it were yesterday...

Harry looked forward to the Malfoys' Christmas party every year. His parents took him and his sister and brothers to the Malfoy house every once in a while, and Harry was permitted to ask Draco to his house, but it didn't happen nearly as often as either boy would have liked. They could have seen each other more often if Mr. Malfoy had believed in sending Draco to school, but even though the labor shortage meant that Draco was without tutors for long periods of time, his father

had not yet lost his resistance to sending his son to one of the schools that educated magical children before they were old enough for Hogwarts.

The year Harry turned seven, Malfoy Manor was decorated in its usual elaborate fashion for the holidays. It seemed that an enormous tree was in each room of the mansion: the grand entrance hall, the drawing room, the study, the dining hall, the ballroom, even the day nursery upstairs, where the children played with Draco's numerous toys. There were also Christmas trees in all of the bedrooms. Harry half-expected to see trees in the bathrooms.

The large painted portraits of Malfoys from other eras were all in the holiday spirit as well, each warbling his or her favorite carols, the tunes overlapping and sometimes growing quite cacophonous if the paintings were too close together. Harry dreaded having to pass the portrait of two elderly sisters that hung outside the guest room where Mrs. Malfoy habitually put him. The Malfoys in the portrait sang the same song each holiday season: The Holly and the Ivy. The trouble was, they couldn't sing at all, or even stay in the same key (and they attempted to harmonize with each other).

In each room, the tree was decorated to coordinate with the decor, so that the blood-red dining hall had a tree with deep red ribbons, fairy lights and ornaments, and the drawing room, which was decorated in an icy-blue Swedish motif, had a tree with blue snowflake ornaments and fairy lights.

Before going to the party each year, Harry loved to see his mother come gliding down their front stairs on his dad's arm, looking almost like a carefully decorated Christmas tree herself (in a good way) with fairy lights in her long red hair and her sweeping green velvet robes touched with real holly berries at the hem. At the party, Nanny Bella was supposed to keep the children under control in the day nursery, but once enough guests had brought their children to her, it quickly spiraled out of control. Harry and Draco and Jamie could never resist playing tricks on the hopelessly slow and unimaginative Crabbe and Goyle, who were too dim sometimes to even know they were the butt of a joke (this wasn't as much fun, naturally, as when they knew).

But the most fun of all was to try to play Paper Chase throughout the house without the adults being wise to what was going on. (It was quite a challenge for a pack of children to impersonate a pack of hunting hounds without their parents figuring it out.) Harry's mother had taught this Muggle game

to her children, and Harry had taught it to Draco and the other children of the witches and wizards they encountered at the large parties held by Draco's parents.

Harry loved being the fox that the hounds were chasing. He would slip nimbly through the rooms, plucking the scraps of parchment from his pocket, leaving a trail here and there for the "hounds" to follow, but trying not to make it too easy for them. You had to really have your eyes open to see where Harry was putting the torn slips; one might be on a book on a shelf, eight feet off the ground, or sitting right on the lap of an elderly witch having a heated argument with another witch about the Minister of Magic. Draco had complained of Harry many times when Harry had been the fox, but he also had to admit that Harry still played completely by the rules.

He was enjoying being the fox again, dashing through the public rooms, ducking under adults' arms lifting delicate crystal to their lips, magical bubbles twinkling into people's laughing mouths, as the orchestra played and Harry skittered across the ballroom floor, hearing the hounds entering noisily, risking discovery. He was always a step ahead of them and far too unobtrusive for the adults to catch on; no one made a better fox than Harry. He slipped into Mr. Malfoy's study after leaving the ballroom and cutting through the dining hall, where the table glittered with the real silver and gold and platinum laid out at each place, fairy lights clinging to the walls and heavy rafters in addition to ornamenting the tree. Harry was about to leave some parchment slips on a chair in the study when he heard footsteps and ducked behind the grand Christmas tree near the fireplace. It was Mr. Malfoy and his mum and dad. His mum sounded upset and Mr. Malfoy was trying to calm her.

"Now, now, Lily, please, let's do this in a less public place. Come into my study. You too, Severus; perhaps you can help me help her to see the sense in this..."

Harry swallowed and pressed himself into the corner behind the Christmas tree; if his mother caught him in here, she'd have a fit. He nervously fingered the parchment slips in his pocket, hoping the others wouldn't be able to adequately follow the trail he'd left so none of them would come stumbling in.

"Sense? Sense? There's some universe in which this idiotic policy would make sense?" Harry recognized that his mother was up for a fight. She never backed down when she sounded

like that. He noticed that his dad was silent, neither arguing with her nor agreeing.

"Please, Lily--sit. Severus--" Harry heard the three of them sit on the worn leather sofas. Leather sofas are very noisy when you sit on them, he realized.

"Just because I'm sitting here doesn't mean I agree with this. What were the Governors thinking?"

"What were we thinking? Well, I can tell you what some of them were thinking--and I mean the ones who are opposed to the Dark Lord. They're trying to protect the Muggle-born children and their families. They think that they're better off not even knowing they're magical, so don't try to blame this on those of us who--who are trying to maintain some standards. Arthur Weasley was the ring-leader on this. It was his idea to no longer accept Muggle-borns at Hogwarts. Maybe you should go get hacked off at him."

"Yes, but his argument is that it would protect people--not that I agree--while your argument tends to contain the word 'Mudblood.' Have you forgotten that I'm Muggle-born?"

"Lily, Lily...surely as someone who is Muggle-born you can appreciate how important it is to keep the existence of the wizarding world a secret? This new policy will protect the wizarding community as well as Muggle-born children and their families..."

"You're repeating yourself, Lucius."

"I wasn't convinced you'd heard me the first time. You certainly didn't behave as though you had." There was a nasty edge to his voice and Harry felt himself growing angry on his mother's behalf, his hands forming hard little fists in his pockets, his heartbeat increasing.

There was a moment of tense silence, before Harry heard his dad say, "When will it take effect?"

"Next summer, the only children turning eleven during 1988 who will receive Hogwarts letters are those who have at least one magical parent. The Muggle-born students who are first years now will be finishing their seventh year in 1994. There's no reason to ask them to leave the school; they and their families already know about the wizarding world. If they choose to leave, of course, we will not stop them, but they are welcome to stay and finish their seven years. See, Lily? We're

not ogres. There was a proposal before the Board of Governors to expel current Muggle-born students, but it was roundly defeated. And we're still going to be taking half-bloods. I mean, in those families, the damage is done before the child ever comes to Hogwarts; there's already a Muggle involved. Denying their children admission to Hogwarts wouldn't change that..."

"The damage is done?" Harry's mother sputtered angrily. "Perhaps if you aspired to be an ogre, you'd be more civil, Lucius."

"Lily--I seem to be saying everything to set you off tonight...Think of what it was like when you were in school. Weren't your parents anxious about you? And not being magical, they had no way to protect you. It's a parent's natural instinct..."

She made a skeptical "hmph!" noise. "If you really believed that, then you'd let me--"

"No!" The voice of Severus Snape was unmistakable. "No, Lily," Harry's stepfather said more softly. "It's better this way."

Now Lucius Malfoy guffawed. "Are we still fighting about this? It's been six years, Lily, and nothing has changed. The Dark Lord would never permit you to become a Death Eater. End of story. You're Muggle-born! And a former Auror! He doesn't trust you. And I think he's right not to. Hear me out--close your mouth! Listen: Narcissa has asked, too, just like you, time and again. He doesn't trust her either. You and Narcissa are Harry's and Draco's mothers. Your first loyalty, your allegiance, would never be to him, and he knows it. It would be to your sons. The instinct of a mother to protect her child is just too--"

"Oh, come off it, Lucius! If that were true there wouldn't be any other women in the ranks of the Death Eaters, and I know there are."

"Ah, but Lily, none of them have children who are part of the Prophecy."

His mother's voice became very low and dangerous-sounding. "You mean none of them are suspected of being part of the Prophecy themselves."

Lucius Malfoy stood and walked to the mantel, uncomfortably close to Harry's hiding place. Harry held his breath, sinking back into the shadowy corner. "Well, we still don't know, do we, Lily? Do you blame the Dark Lord for not wanting to be in the same place with you and your son and my son? Why he wouldn't want to take that chance?" He switched gears suddenly. "When is your birthday?" he demanded of her.

She didn't answer. Harry imagined her face, angry green eyes and mouth drawn into a line. He'd seen her like this often enough.

"The eighth of April." She had not answered; his stepfather had.

Harry could see Mr. Malfoy nod, his profile outlined eerily by some candles on the other side of the room. "See? You could easily be the flame-haired daughter of war. You are an Aries..."

"As are one twelfth of the people born on the planet. If half of them are female, that makes one-twenty-fourth of the earth's population. That really narrows it down, Lucius. Brilliant. I also have the same birthday as Buddha. You know, the Buddha. Does that mean I'm also going to found a major world religion?"

Mr. Malfoy whipped out his wand and pointed it; Harry's hands were balled into fists so tight his fingernails were cutting into his palms; his teeth were clenched together so tightly it made his head ache.

"You will not speak to me that way! Just one word from me and the Dark Lord will--"

Suddenly, his wand flew out of his grasp; it seemed to be drawn to the ceiling by a very strong magnet (if wands were magnetic). It did not make contact with the ceiling, but hovered a few feet below it, which still put it more than ten feet from the floor and well out of Mr. Malfoy's reach. He looked up, his mouth open. Then he looked in the direction of Harry's parents, glaring angrily. Harry was still shaking; he could feel blood on his hands where he'd broken the skin with his own nails. Mr. Malfoy had opened his mouth to speak again, but it was his stepfather's smooth, even voice that Harry heard.

"Could you give us some privacy, Lucius? I would like to speak to my wife."

Mr. Malfoy still glared. He glanced up at his wand, still hovering in the air. Harry swallowed and felt the tension drain out of him; he collapsed against the wall and the wand clattered to the floor. Mr. Malfoy leaned down and picked it up, putting it back in his robes and striding out of the room without another word, anger emanating from him like heat..

Harry shifted slightly so he could see his mum and dad through the branches of the tree. His mother sat on the edge of the leather sofa, looking as tense as Harry had just been. Her husband put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back to relax against him. She put her head on his shoulder with a tired sigh for only a moment before popping back up with nervous energy.

"Lily--"

She paced, throwing her hands in the air. "I know, I know, Severus. I shouldn't let him--"

"You shouldn't let him get to you." Their words overlapped and she smiled, lacing her fingers through his.

"Finishing my sentences. The only other person who did that was--"

"I know."

She drew her lips into a line. "I wish we didn't have to pretend to be friends with that--that--I can't even find words vile enough to describe him. And we had to have them stand up with us at our wedding! Oh, Severus..."

"Well, who was going to do it if not them? You're not speaking to your sister--or she's not speaking to you--and I couldn't very well let the Death Eaters see Albus standing by my side, could I? Or do you think Sirius Black was wanting to be my best man? Pettigrew might have, I suppose, if he hadn't been Kissed...thank goodness for that. It would have been nice to know who the third person in the Prophecy is, but at least he was rendered harmless before he could tell the Dark Lord...Look on the bright side, Lily: Lucius and Narcissa gave us a nice place to have the party after the ceremony."

His mother made the "hmph!" noise again. Harry heard her pick up something and put it down again with a heavy thunk. "Oh, yes. A lovely setting. Everything in it the epitome of 'ill-gotten gains.'"

"Lily--"

"Yes, yes. You don't have to tell me. But he is so--so--" Harry could hear the frustration in her voice.

"Go on. Get it out of your system."

"Scum. That's what he is. No--pond scum. No--he would have to spend several million years evolving into a higher form of life in order to be pond scum..."

Harry felt a fit of giggles coming on, but covered his mouth to avoid being discovered. His stepfather threw back his head, smiling and laughing. "That's my girl! A little creative Lucius-bashing is good for the soul."

"But not as satisfying as putting a good hex on him...And as for letting him get to me--I can't help it. I can't accept that in nine or ten years, they're just going to take Harry from me, and there's nothing I can do; I can't be there to make sure he's safe--"

"I'll be there, Lily. I'll take care of him. I always have done."

She smiled at him again. "Yes, you have. I just wish--"

"Of course you do. It's only natural. Which is exactly why he doesn't want you there, and Narcissa as well. You wouldn't want to see--" and he stopped, swallowing. It seemed to Harry that there was something he didn't want to say and did want to say, all at once. "There are things he'll have to endure, and things he'll have to do, that you shouldn't see..."

She stood still now, holding his hand. "You were only eighteen when he recruited you. What did you have to do? What did you have to endure?" she asked softly. He shrugged.

"I had it easy, compared to most. Recruiting a few people who were easy touches; if I hadn't approached them, they probably would have started asking people in every wizarding pub from the Orkneys to the Channel Islands about how to join the Death Eaters."

"And Barty Crouch's son."

His dad nodded. "And him. One good thing about recruiting him, though; if I hadn't been close to him, he never would have taken me to Godric's Hollow that night, and I wouldn't have been there when you needed me..."

"But he put Cruciatus on you!"

He shrugged. "And I didn't report him, so he believed me when I said I'd only told you because I loved you. I was never even punished for that, since I'd already suffered Cruciatus, and after six years Crouch still has no idea I'm working for Albus. Which allows me to continue to watch him. Somehow--there are times he strikes me as being more dangerous than Lucius."

"That bad?"

He nodded. "He hates his father more than you can possibly imagine. I think what he'd really like to do is to get caught doing some spectacular thing, firing the Dark Mark into the air afterwards, and then--a trial."

She shook her head. "It would be the end of his father's career...Could you imagine what people would do if it came out that the son of the Minister of Magic is a Death Eater?"

"Yes." Harry's dad's voice was quiet and even. Neither one of them elaborated on this further. It sounded rather like his stepfather wanted to stop the conversation. His mother leaned over and kissed her husband on the cheek.

"I'm going up to check on the children. I think I saw slips of parchment in the ballroom. Harry was probably being the fox again. He's such a ringleader. I never should have taught them to play Paper Chase..."

"Now, Lily. He's a good boy."

"I know, I know. But Draco...do you think he's a good influence?"

"Lucius hired Bella back after Draco's first three tutors quit, so she'd be able to take care of him even when he didn't have someone to teach him. You know where her loyalties lie as well as I do--and Albus trusts her completely. I have no qualms about her taking care of Harry and Draco when they're together, and sometimes Lucius lets Draco come to our house..."

"Well, I have doubts about her being able to take care of large numbers of children during parties. I know I saw that Parkinson girl running through the drawing room..."

Her husband smiled and laughed. "I'm sure they're fine, but why don't you go check on them anyway? They should probably be tucked up in bed soon, and you could kiss them goodnight."

She reluctantly separated her hand from his and walked to the door. When she was gone, his stepfather leaned back and put his hands behind his head, saying calmly, "She's gone. You can come out now, Harry."

Harry sucked in his breath and pressed himself against the walls where they met in the corner. His dad waited a minute before speaking again. "Continuing to pretend you are not in the corner behind the Christmas tree will not do any good." Harry let his breath out and gave up. He stood, edging past the sharp needles of the tree, walking over to his stepfather who was looking at him sternly from the couch. Harry did his best to look remorseful; he usually found this helped to shorten lectures and scoldings.

But his dad patted the seat next to him, saying, "Sit down, Harry."

Harry sat, looking straight ahead into the fire, remembering Mr. Malfoy standing there, dreadful and austere. Without looking at his dad, he said, "How did you..."

"Two things, Harry. One, you moved some branches. I noticed just as your mother said she was going to check on you. Two, I know that I didn't take Lucius'--I mean, Mr. Malfoy's--wand from him, and when I saw the tree branches move, I realized that it probably hadn't been your mother, either, although at first I thought so. She probably thought it was me. Once I saw that branch move, I realized that it was more the sort of thing you might do."

Harry grimaced. "I didn't mean to. He was just being so mean to mum..."

His dad put his arm around his shoulders and Harry pillowed his head on his chest. "I know. You feel the anger rising inside you..."

"Yes," Harry mumbled, closing his eyes, still seeing the fire dancing on the insides of his eyelids.

They were silent for a few minutes, before his dad asked him quietly, "How much of what you heard did you understand, Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes. "Um...I fell asleep. I don't really remember what you were saying," he lied. His dad looked at him suspiciously.

"You don't remember." The older man sounded skeptical. Harry squirmed; his dad had a look in his eye that made it hard for Harry to lie.

"Well, except for a couple of things. What's a Death Eater? What's a prophecy?" His stepfather drew his lips into a line and looked very grim. Harry hoped he might find out, but he was disappointed. His dad did not answer his questions.

"I don't want a single word you heard in this room repeated to anyone. Understand, Harry? Anyone." Harry nodded, then put his head down again and closed his eyes. What he'd heard was so confusing, he didn't really want to talk to his dad about it. He could remember the words, but what did it really mean, all of it? It was very confusing...

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there, leaning against his dad with his eyes closed, but suddenly he felt movement, and large, gentle hands picking him up; he laid his cheek on his dad's shoulder and knew when they were going up to the second floor because he could feel the jogs as his stepfather put his foot on each step. He thought about letting him know he was still awake, but decided to continue to feign sleep instead. Nothing in the world was as wonderful to Harry at that moment as still being small enough to be carried to bed; his mum hadn't done this in a while, as he'd had a growth spurt the previous year, but his dad could still manage it. There was a slightly queasy feeling of being lowered onto the bed in the guestroom where he always stayed, and then Harry felt his shoes being pulled off and the quilt being pulled up to his chin. His dad's chapped lips pressed briefly against his forehead, then Harry heard his steps receding, the door opening...But it didn't close.

"Lily!" his stepfather exclaimed softly. "Shhh! He's already asleep."

"Where was he?" Harry heard his mother whisper.

"Downstairs."

"He was the fox again, wasn't he?"

"I think so."

Harry heard his mother give a deep sigh. "The way they follow him...It's not like a pack of hounds following a fox. It's more like they're following the Pied Piper."

He heard his stepfather give a soft laugh. "He's a natural leader, Lily."

There was a longish pause before he heard his mother say, "That's what I'm afraid of..."

Then he heard her footsteps drawing nearer, and he fought the urge to hold his breath, instead keeping his breathing as steady and sleep-like as possible. He felt her soft lips on his cheek and forehead, then felt her hand brushing his hair from his brow. He heard them leave, and soon after, he was no longer feigning sleep...

The horseless carriage swayed a little as they made their way out of the village. "Mum," Harry said suddenly, "does it ever seem strange to you to be teaching at Hogwarts, when Muggle-born students aren't admitted anymore?" Now that he had remembered the Christmas party from when he was seven, he knew why the number of first years had seemed low to him.

His mother looked startled, then guarded. She drew her lips into a line, then clasped her hands; her knuckles were very white. "Sometimes, but--"

"When did they stop taking Muggle-borns anyway, Mum?" Jamie broke in. Their mother raised an eyebrow at her. "Er, sorry for interrupting, Mum."

She sighed now. "The last year they sent letters to Muggle-born witches and wizards was 1987. But it wasn't just--exclusionary. A number of people on the Board of Governors thought--what with everything going on in the wizarding world--that it was safer for those young people and their families not to be drawn into it..." *Drawn into it*, Harry thought. Into the hell in which they were all living because Voldemort had never fallen. *Because his mother was still alive.*

Harry looked at her. "But weren't most of them doing it because they only wanted pure-bloods at the school?"

She grimaced. "We don't have that rule yet, thank goodness. Hogwarts still takes half-bloods." Now she looked down at her hands. "Don't worry about it, Harry."

Harry was silent, digesting this information. *Where is Hermione?* Suddenly this question consumed his being, making his pulse quicken, his breathing difficult. The smartest witch--Muggle-born or not--to come to Hogwarts in

ages, and she was out there in the world somewhere, not even knowing she was a witch.

"Wouldn't it have been better to keep taking Muggle-born students? I mean, the labor shortage is partly because of, er, casualties, but it's also because of the wizard population shrinking. Without Muggle-born students--"

"Harry. Trust me. They're better off not knowing." Either his mother had come to agree with the policy over the last nine years, or she was feeling an obligation to toe the party line, as a professor.

"But--" Harry furrowed his brow, trying to find the right words "--they're just out there, doing magic, unable to control it, maybe not even knowing they're causing the weird things that sometimes happen around them. Wouldn't manifestations of accidental magic be even stronger as a person gets older?"

His mother reluctantly agreed. "Technically, yes. But do you think the Ministry is that careless? They still *know* who the magical people are, and they keep track of the Muggle-born witches and wizards especially, so that when accidental magic occurs, the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad can be on-site and reversing the magic before anyone--including the witch or wizard--is the wiser. Perhaps one day it will be safe to tell them, but until then..."

"Anyway, Harry," his sister interjected now, "what was up with you and Tunny? I mean, being *nice* to a house-elf!" She ignored her mother glaring at her.

Harry bristled, and partly because he was suddenly acutely missing Hermione, he shot back at her, "I'm nice to people who are nice to me! I guess that leaves *you* out...Anyway, why should they have to slave away all the time and get nothing for it? Is that fair?"

He glowered at his sister; she was staring at him open-mouthed. But then he saw that his mother was staring at him too; he expected her to be as shocked and angry as his sister, but surprisingly, she was tearing up, pulling a handkerchief out of her pocket and blowing her nose. Harry's eyes widened with concern.

"Are you all right, mum? What's wrong?"

She finished wiping her eyes and nose and put the handkerchief away, her eyes still red-rimmed. "Oh, nothing. I'm all right, really. It's just that sometimes--you remind me so much of your father..."

He looked at her in amazement. He remembered his mother and father staring each other down in the corridor outside Gryffindor Tower, pointing

their wands at each other; he remembered his father saving Severus Snape from becoming Remus Lupin's midnight snack, and seeing her staring at his father in the hospital wing afterward. He remembered James Potter saying softly to her, "...*if he had died, it would have made you sad...*" and looking at her with his eyes full of love. And then there was the match during their seventh year, when his father had bested Severus Snape, and James Potter and Lily Evans had kissed on the Quidditch pitch, for all the school to see...

They rode on in silence. At last, the castle towers came into view; Harry stared at them hungrily. Now he felt like he was coming home; his chest hitched as the familiar emotions moved through him. There was no place like Hogwarts. It was still his favorite place in all the world.

"We're here," his sister announced needlessly. She smiled at him, having evidently gotten over his telling her off on the topic of house-elves. Their mother opened the door and climbed out, and they followed. His dad and brothers were already standing in the drive; the doors to the entrance hall were open at the top of the stone steps. Stuart and Simon were learning to temper their levitation charms so that the trunks would float gently into the castle, instead of soaring up over the roof.

Harry had a sudden mental image of Jamie trying this the previous September, and because her trunk wasn't properly closed and locked when it tipped at an odd angle in the air, all of her clothes and books and potions supplies--everything she'd brought to school--went tumbling down the steeply-slanted tile roofs and into the stone gutters; one of the gargoyles had suddenly woken up when her cauldron had struck it on the head, and it started directing a stream of obscenities at her. Harry found himself laughing at the memory.

"Hey, Jamie," he managed to say, at last, through his laughter; she was looking at him like he was daft. "Remember last year when you levitated your trunk up above the roof and then all your stuff spilled out of it? And that gargoyle was cursing at you..."

She grimaced. "Oh. That's why you were laughing."

Now his brothers joined him. "That was great, James!" Simon said. Harry thought it was Simon, anyway.

"You should have seen Binns' face the next day when he saw a bra hanging down in one of his windows, flapping in the breeze!" probably-Stuart chimed in. Jamie was looking like she'd be practicing hexes in a minute, rather than levitation charms.

"All right, all right," she groaned. "That's what I get for having all brothers. Hey, Mum! You're still young. How about giving me a sister sometime, eh?"

Their mother was moving Harry's and Jamie's trunks into the entrance hall, her levitation charm sure and steady. "Don't be impertinent. We are at school now. You will call me Professor Evans."

Harry thought about this. Yes, he remembered now; his mother wasn't Lily Snape or Lily Potter. She'd taken back her maiden name. She was Professor Lily Evans. It wasn't common knowledge that she and Severus Snape were even married, let alone that they were Harry's, Jamie's, Stuart's and Simon's parents. Those who asked Stuart and Simon about their relationship to Professor Snape were told that they were "related," but nothing more. Harry's own mother called him and his sister "Potter" (sometimes Mr. Potter and Miss Potter) and his brothers Mr. Stuart Snape and Mr. Simon Snape (Snape or Mr. Snape would be too confusing with two of them). She always called each twin by the correct name.

Harry looked up at the castle fondly, remembering running around it when he was quite small. They'd lived at Hogwarts from September of 1983 to September of 1984. The wedding had been on Valentine's Day in 1984. Right, he thought. That anniversary card looked like a Valentine because it was that too. And the twins were born about three weeks after his fourth birthday...

Oh, Harry thought, glancing at his mother and reddening. The twins were born six months after the wedding. Plus, they had all been living at the castle for months *before* the wedding. He'd never really thought about it before. Professor Dumbledore must have approved it. They had rooms in the staff wing, where the students never went. There was a sitting room, a day nursery where Harry and Jamie played with their mother, a bedroom for Severus Snape and their mother, and a night nursery for Harry and Jamie, their cots separated by a small table which held an enchanted glowing globe that served as their night-light. They played outdoors in good weather in a large, grassy courtyard which was overlooked by other rooms in the staff quarters. No students at the school ever suspected any of their teachers was married, let alone raising small children. Harry's mother wasn't teaching yet.

Harry had loved exploring the castle during the summer, when it was empty and echoing. Draco came to stay with them for much of that summer, and together, the four-year-olds found many fascinating nooks and crannies which they catalogued away in their minds for future use, especially a secret passage they found on the fourth floor, behind a mirror. Harry was rather frightened about it when he was young, but since he'd actually become a student, he had learned that the passage led to Hogsmeade (he'd finally had the nerve to follow it as far as it went). It wound up backstage in the village hall where his mother and stepfather had wed.

Now he remembered Fred and George pointing out this passage on the Marauder's Map, saying that it had caved in. As far as Harry knew, in *this*

life, it hadn't caved in. *The Map*, he thought. Have Fred and George found the map in this life? He didn't know. They wouldn't even be students at the school any more, they would have finished their seventh year...

In fact, try as he might, Harry couldn't even remember *speaking* to Fred and George in this life. He could picture them in his mind, being rowdy in the Great Hall, at the Gryffindor table, flying around with their Gryffindor Quidditch robes flapping around them, or huddled over a parchment in the library, preparing a practical joke of some sort and already laughing in anticipation. But then he remembered that in his *other* life, Fred and George had immediately recognized him at age eleven by the lightning-bolt-shaped scar on his forehead. There'd be no reason for them to just walk up to him and talk to him in this life; he wasn't famous. He'd never even taken the school train, he realized with a jolt. So many things were different. He remembered more now...

After Stuart and Simon had been born, they'd bought the house in Hogsmeade, and the very next day after they'd moved in, Harry started attending the village school. His dad rode his broomstick up to the castle every day, riding back to have tea with them at five o'clock. Then he often had to go back to the castle to attend meetings or oversee detentions. Sometimes he stayed at the castle if it was his turn to patrol the corridors at night.

A couple of years later, Jamie started going to the village school. She and Harry walked down the High Street together, holding hands, while their mother walked behind them, pushing Stuart and Simon in a double-width pram. Harry still only saw Draco occasionally. When Stuart and Simon were ready for school two years later, Harry was shocked and pleased to see his friend when he walked into the fifth-year classroom on the first day of school. In a way, Jamie was his best friend, but she was also his sister, and two years younger than him. Draco was a boy, and just a few weeks older than him. He could really be a *mate*.

That year his mother started teaching Potions at Hogwarts and his dad switched to teaching Dark Arts. That was also the first year the Board of Governors did not send letters to Muggle-born witches and wizards, and the Headmaster left over it.

Now that both of his parents were teaching, home-life became hectic. His mother and stepfather took turns dashing home on their brooms to meet them at the house after school. Then the other one would dash home to give them their tea while the first one would dash back to the castle...

For his last three years at the village school, Harry felt like he only saw both of them in a room at the same time on the weekends and for holidays. This went on until it was time for the twins to attend Hogwarts; then his parents decided to rent the house out and live in the staff quarters during term, while Harry and his siblings lived in the dorms.

Harry wished he could go live in the staff quarters again--it was quite posh--but he wasn't even supposed to let on that two of the professors were his parents. Draco knew, of course, and a handful of other students, but most people did not.

"Harry!" Harry jumped. His dad was holding up broomsticks. "Want to come down to the Quidditch pitch while we wait for the others to arrive? I have a Quaffle and a Snitch right here. Let's not use Bludgers."

"Aaaaw, Daaaad," the twins whined in unison. Their father laughed. Harry smiled at him. He liked it when his dad laughed. He seemed to laugh a lot in this life; he was a happy person here, married, with children...

Harry nodded. "I'll be Seeker."

His dad's eyebrows flew up. "Are you sure? You're captain this year, but I hope you're not going to take Draco off the Seeker position. He'd be devastated." Harry felt his heart leap. Draco and I are on the same team! In the same house! And I'm the captain. I play--he thought about it--Keeper. That's it...

"I'm not changing Draco. I mean just for now. That way you can be Keeper and Stuart and Simon can try to score against you. You're better than me, anyway."

"Now, Harry, you're quite good. I've been teaching you to be a Keeper since you could fly a broom..."

Harry knew this was true as soon as it was out of his mouth. He pictured his stepfather as a seventh year, trying to keep the Quaffle out of the goals, and, if it was James Potter playing Chaser, failing quite spectacularly. If my father had lived, would he have taught me to be a Chaser? Harry wondered. He separated the two men in his head by thinking of his stepfather as his *dad* and James Potter as his *father*. Many times, though, he was just *James Potter*. An unreal, misty sort of person, not quite real. A person who only existed in photographs. And in the memories Harry had from his other life, from when he'd entered Severus Snape's Pensieve.

What would happen, he wondered, if you tried to put memories of being in a Pensieve *in* a Pensieve? What would happen if he tried to put *any* memories of his other life into a Pensieve? As he approached the Quidditch pitch with his dad and brothers, he shuddered. A Pensieve is expensive, he knew. I'm not rich anymore, he realized with a jolt. That vault of money at Gringott's isn't mine, it's my mum's and my dad's. And how much of that had gone to buy the Hogsmeade house? he wondered. It was *huge*. There could be a mortgage on it, he supposed, but given the ridiculous interest rates Goblins would probably charge, who'd want to have a mortgage if you could pay cash?

When they reached the pitch, Harry took his broom off his shoulder and looked at the handle. *Thunderbolt 500* was burned into the wood. Thunderbolt? he thought, perplexed. It should be *Firebolt*. But try as he might, he couldn't remember ever hearing of a Firebolt broom in this life. He shrugged to himself; it looked like a good broom. He mounted it and pushed off, feeling the thrill of being aloft again, the wind making his robes flap, his hair whipping around his head...There was *nothing* like it. Good, he thought. That's *one* thing that hasn't changed.

His brothers gamely tried passing the Quaffle back and forth, but every time they tried to score on their father, he caught it handily. Harry laughed at the looks on their faces whenever their attempts to score were intercepted. He was enjoying just flying around the pitch, rushing through the air. He was also enjoying watching his dad's skill as a Keeper; he really *was* good. Harry smiled; that of course, meant that his *father* had been very, *very* good as a Chaser, to have gotten the better of Severus Snape.

After his dad had intercepted the Quaffle for more than half an hour, Harry thought he saw a golden glimmer near the ground. He had simply been enjoying the flight, circling the pitch, letting the wind caress him, his brothers and stepfather turning into blurs. Now he went into a dive; he had to have been a hundred feet up. He felt his stomach lurch in that way that was thrilling and vomit-inducing all at once. Before conscious thought could return, he had the small, winged ball in his hand and he'd leveled off, flying a mere four feet above the ground, grinning. He hadn't done that in *so long*; he'd forgotten how exhilarating it was! As he came in for a landing, joining his dad and brothers on the grass, he was met with shocked, disbelieving faces.

"Simon, you're standing on my foot," Stuart complained, as Harry joined them. Simon's mouth was hanging open, as Stuart's had been a moment earlier before the pain in his foot had prompted him to speak.

"Harry! I--I've never seen you fly like that--" Simon said. He only knew it was Simon because of what Stuart had just said.

Harry flushed, holding out the Snitch to his dad. "Here," was all he could think of to say, swallowing. His stepfather was looking at him appraisingly too, and Harry had the distinct impression that the older man was reading his mind. He shook himself; that was ridiculous. Children only *think* their parents can read their minds...

Then Harry noticed an ugly red blister on the back of Stuart's hand. "Stu!" Harry cried pointing at it, glad of something to distract from his uncharacteristic Seeking.

"Damn!" his brother cried upon seeing the blister.

"Language--" their dad cautioned, but not very strongly. He withdrew a tube of ointment from his robe pocket and handed it to his son. "Did you take your Porphyry Potion this morning?" he demanded sternly. Stuart pointedly ignored him. As he was rubbing the salve on his hand, he glared at his father. When he spoke, his voice was thick with tears.

"Don't know why you bothered even *having* kids. You knew we'd get your disgusting disease."

"Stu!" Harry said in surprise. His brother frowned darkly and ignored him, too.

"I'm sick of the vampire jokes, and so is Si." Simon looked at his father with wide-eyed innocence. "We didn't *ask* to be born..."

Harry sucked in his breath. This was such a sudden change of mood. But then again, Stuart had also just been frustrated by his repeated inability to score against his father. Harry remembered that porphyria also caused a person to be "tetchy" and experience mood swings, degenerating into dementia...Well, Stuart was certainly having a mood swing now, Harry thought. He looked at his dad. Harry had never seen such a stricken look on his face.

"I'll see you all back at the castle," he said tersely, turning, his robes swirling around him. Harry and his brothers followed at a distance, Harry seething at his brother the whole way back. Simon walked behind them with his hands in his pockets. Harry walked behind Stuart, boring holes in the back of his head with his eyes.

When they were close to the castle, Harry spoke to the back of his brother's head through gritted teeth. "That was disgusting. Dad's been living with porphyria all his life. Where do you get off whining about it when you're only twelve? All you had to do was put the ointment on without screwing it up. How hard is that?"

They had almost reached the castle. His brother turned and faced him, the anger and resentment in his eyes surprising Harry. "Oh, yeah, like you know what it's like. You don't have to be his *son*, just his *stepson*. You're just so thrilled to *have* a dad, *any* dad, you don't care what he is. You don't *have* to care." He turned away from Harry again and walked up the castle steps into the entrance hall. "You know, don't you, that *your* dad dying was the best thing that ever happened to him? I'll bet he danced on Potter's grave..."

They were just inside the entrance hall now, and Harry lunged at him, knocking him down. Stuart managed to turn over underneath him. Harry knelt over his brother, his hands around his throat.

"He would never do that! Take that back!" Then he felt Simon leap on his back and put *his* arm around his throat. Harry grunted as the amount of air he could take in diminished markedly. Stuart reached up and put his hand on Harry's glasses, pulling them off and flinging them across the hall. Then he tried to grab Harry's nose. Harry yelled as his brothers assaulted him, and the twins hollered as he continued to fight them.

"Harry Potter! Stuart and Simon Snape!"

Harry looked up. The twins froze also. Even without his glasses, he could see that the person who had shrilly cried their names was Professor McGonagall, standing at the foot of the marble stairs, her eyes shooting daggers at them, her lips looking thinner than he'd ever seen them. *The Headmistress*. Harry turned his head slightly; by squinting, he could see his parents standing in the doorway of the Great Hall. His dad's face was paler than pale, his dark eyes blazing, while his mother's face was absolutely furious. Harry thought he could see some other blurry professors through the door to the Great Hall. Jamie stood next to his mother, a barely-suppressed merry expression on her face; she was clearly trying very hard not to laugh. Harry did *not* feel like laughing.

Simon climbed off Harry's back, looking sheepish. Harry rose also, extending his hand to Stuart, who ignored it and stood under his own power. Severus Snape had picked up Harry's glasses, and now he grabbed his stepson by the ear. Harry winced as he was dragged up the marble stairs and down a long corridor. He finally let go of Harry's ear and thrust his glasses at him when they reached his office. Harry remembered it being Remus Lupin's office, and Gilderoy Lockhart's, too. Plus there was Moody...the Moodies, rather, real and fake. It seemed odd that his office was no longer in the dungeons. That must be my mum's office now, Harry thought. He put on his glasses and rubbed his ear; it was rather sore.

"We haven't even been here long enough for the others to arrive, and you and your brothers are already at it. They're second years; I expect this of them. Not that I'm excusing their behavior; far from it. But you're a sixth-year now, Harry. I expect better from you. At least you didn't try to hex him. What could possibly make you do such a thing?" Harry grimaced. He didn't particularly want to reveal the reason for the fight. "Well?" his dad persisted.

Harry squirmed. "Stu said..." he began softly.

"What? Speak up!" Gone was the man he'd spoken to in the butler's pantry at home; here was the familiar stern professor Harry had originally met in his other life when he was eleven. He felt the urge to be obstinate come over him, and fought it. All right, he thought. Let him try to continue to scold when he hears what happened...

"He said," Harry said clearly now in an even tone, "that my father dying was the best thing that ever happened to you and that you probably danced on his grave."

His stepfather shrunk back in his chair, an appalled expression on his face.
"He said that?"

"But I told him that you would never do that and he should take it back. Well, I jumped him first; then I told him that."

He was immediately sorry that he'd said anything when he saw the look on his dad's face: an unmistakable guilty expression. Harry understood; he remembered Cedric Diggory, and Dudley...

He tried to bring his dad back to the present. "Am I to have detention? House points deducted?" He would say anything to get that expression off his dad's face. His stepfather looked up at him, startled, as though he had forgotten why they were there.

"What? Oh, no. I think you should just wait up here until the train pulls in and the carriages have brought the other students to the castle. You can come down for the Sorting and the Welcoming Feast. I will make sure your mother puts the twins down in her office to wait, if she hasn't already. I'm sure they'll be getting an earful from her." Harry wondered whether they would tell the truth or some elaborately-embellished version of events that made him come off looking like the instigator.

"Maybe--maybe Jamie can come up and wait with me? If she wants, I mean. Unless my punishment is supposed to be solitary."

His dad smiled ruefully. "No, that would be fine, if she wants to come up. And it's not punishment so much as--keeping you and the twins apart." He rose, brushing down his robes, even though they looked perfect as ever.

"Dad?" Harry said suddenly. His stepfather turned, not correcting him and telling him to call him "Professor Snape" as his mother had done with Jamie.

"Yes, Harry?"

"I--I believe what I said. I don't think you hated my father anymore by the time he died. I--I think you were as sorry he was dead as everyone else. Maybe not as much as mum, but probably no one else--well, you know what I mean."

He peered at Harry suspiciously. "I didn't hate him *anymore*? What makes you think I hated him?"

"Well, er, because he saved your life. And then mum wasn't your girlfriend anymore, he was. When you were all still in school."

His suspicion seemed to be growing by the minute. "How do you know he saved my life? How do you know your mother and I--well, any of it?"

Harry swallowed. Was he not supposed to know this? He tried to recover. "You know; I've, um, kept my ears open, over the years...When Sirius tried to lure you under the Whomping Willow, during the full moon, and Remus was--you know."

His dad paced back and forth, looking angry--but not at him, oddly. "So you know about that, do you? About what Sirius did--by the way, Professor Black, to you--and you know about Remus, too?"

Harry nodded. *Professor Black*. Oh, right, Harry thought; that's who took over Transfiguration after McGonagall became headmistress. His dad's face was clouded over, remembering less-than-happy days at school.

"Why do you think she broke up with me over that?"

Harry was the one confused now. "Didn't she?"

He was terse and distant again now. "No. I broke up with her. And that's all we will discuss for now. I will go see whether Jamie wishes to keep you company." And his dad was gone.

I broke up with her.

What? Harry thought. That didn't make any sense. He was still in love with her. Why would he break up with her? Not that it mattered; they were together now. But still--very odd, that.

Harry went to the window to watch and wait for the carriages to come up the road from the Hogsmeade station; he wasn't sure how soon it would be, but it was getting dark. Probably soon. Almost half an hour had passed since his dad had left when he heard Jamie enter. He turned to see her bouncing over to him, smiling. He grimaced. Oh, she was probably loving this, he thought, waiting for the gloating to commence.

"So. You owe me ten Sickles," she told him, punching him lightly on the upper arm and then leaning her chin on her hands as she took up a position next to him at the window.

"What?"

"Our bet. About who would get detention first when we got to school. You owe me."

"But I haven't got detention..."

"Right. Try to weasel out of the bet by pretending you didn't bet you'd get detention first. Simon and Stuart *do* have detention, just like I said they would. You should have heard Mum lay into them. I was listening outside her office."

Harry turned his head, smiling at her. "Eavesdropping again?"

"Eaves were *not* required. You could hear Mum all over the dungeons. It's a good thing no one is here yet except for us and the other teachers."

"And the ghosts and house-elves..."

"Are you going to go off on house-elves again? Honestly, Harry, that was just *weird*. Are you sure you're my brother?"

Harry swallowed; no, that was the *last* thing of which he was sure. "I'm not your uncle..."

"Well, you still owe me. I can't believe I let you bet that *you'd* get a detention before Si and Stu. I mean, when I saw the three of you in the entrance hall, I was *sure* you'd staged that just to win the bet."

"I did not stage it. Stu said--"

He stopped looking at her and swallowed. She frowned at him. "What did Stu say?"

"Um...nevermind. But I did not stage the fight."

"Well, anyway, I knew that once Dad had taken you and Mum had taken them, *they* were the ones who were going to get the detention. You're Dad's pet."

"I am not..."

"Are so. I'm not jealous or anything. It's just a fact. And I'm their little girl, so that puts me in a class by myself. I wouldn't say the twins are Mum's pets, though; she hovers over them a bit, because of the porphyria, but that's natural, I suppose. Stu looked a bit better the last few days, didn't he? I mean, better than he has since getting back from hospital, anyway. I wonder why it's worse for him than for Dad or Si?"

Harry furrowed his brow. Hospital? Then he remembered; Stuart had spent half of his summer holiday in St. Mungo's. His mother had wanted to take him to a Muggle hospital and try to get him on a list for a liver transplant, but there would be too many questions from the Muggle doctors they wouldn't be able to answer (about the Porphyry Potion, for

starters), plus his dad wouldn't hear of it. Wizards didn't believe in cutting open the body; the only acceptable cures were through spells or potions. No wizard would ever dream of letting himself undergo surgery (and with a Muggle doctor!) for any reason. Stuart had grown up with this proscription like any other wizard. His mother had screamed about this attitude being antiquated and dangerous, to no avail. Harry remembered Moody telling him about getting his leg amputated in 1915, by a Muggle doctor, with nothing for the pain...That was probably how wizards thought of surgery. A barbaric, dangerous practice. They didn't know the wonders that were possible with modern medicine, like organ transplants.

Stuart had to take the Porphyry Potion more often than either his father or his twin; somehow, his body wasn't coping as well as theirs, and he had more of a temper, too. Harry felt like kicking himself now for jumping his brother; he hoped his mother didn't go too hard on the twins. *No wonder Simon jumped on my back like that, he thought.*

Harry shrugged at his sister; he had no answer. Then he squinted into the dusk. "Look," he said to her, pointing toward the village. "They're coming."

He'd never seen this in his other life; it was a beautiful sight. Above the dark silhouettes of the village houses the sky was a watercolor wash in apricot and peach, shading upward to jade, aqua, and finally sapphire blue, punctuated by the bright evening star. The pumpkin-like carriages were outlined by small glowing dots, so that they seemed to be a very organized army of fireflies making their way to the castle. There were also lanterns hanging on each carriage, two in front and two behind, casting a golden glow on the dark landscape. The procession of carriages down the winding road in the diminishing light was breathtaking and--Harry had to smile at himself, since he could think of no better word for it--magical.

He and his sister opened the heavy metal-framed casement window, leaning out to look down at the first carriages arriving. Students climbed out, chattering to each other, continuing conversations from the train. Harry felt a pang of jealousy; he missed taking the Hogwarts Express. It was a wonderful transition from the Muggle world to this world. Of course, he thought, I don't live in the Muggle world any more...

As carriage after carriage stopped and students spilled out, there were more and more reunions in front of the castle steps, brightly illuminated by the huge torches on either side of the enormous front door. Harry saw Liam Quirke, looking just as he had at King's Cross Station that morning (in his other life) and he was wearing a shiny Head Boy badge on his robes. Well, Harry thought with satisfaction, that much is the same. Good for Liam. Except--Harry realized suddenly that Justin Finch-Fletchley would not be here if Muggles were not receiving letters any more. He'd probably be at Eton. Well, Harry thought, maybe Liam has found somebody else. He felt a little sad for him, though.

Some other Ravenclaws had been in the carriage with Liam. Harry saw Evan Davies and Mandy Brocklehurst, with their prefect badges on display. Then Harry had a sudden thought. He glanced down at his rumpled robes, then out at the other students again. *I'm not a prefect.* I'm not a prefect! he thought excitedly now, smiling to himself. No more prefects' meetings! On the other hand, he considered, Liam probably wouldn't be as bad as Roger was. And since he'd remembered that Cedric had been Head Boy during the previous year, that meant that Roger Davies *hadn't* been. He smiled even more broadly. Ha! to you, Roger Davies! He wondered what Roger was doing now that he was out of school. Who would hire that git? he thought.

Then he wondered who the Head Girl was, but he very soon had his answer when Cho Chang was helped out of her carriage, her badge glinting in the light from the torches. Harry smiled; good. She deserved it here, as in the other life. Then he noticed the boy who had emerged from the carriage first and helped her to climb out; more a man than a boy with those broad shoulders, he was exceptionally tall, wore a silver prefect badge on his deep black robes, and his hair was like fire. He leaned down to give Cho a quick kiss on the mouth, then walked with his arm around her toward the steps leading up to the castle door.

It was Ron Weasley.

Harry felt his jaw drop, then he closed his mouth abruptly, hoping his sister hadn't noticed. She hadn't; she seemed to be searching the carriages avidly for one particular face. Having seen her gazing at the framed photograph while she was packing, Harry had a feeling he knew who she was waiting to see.

But someone else was emerging from the carriage in which Ron and Cho had been riding; it was Neville Longbottom, but a Neville Longbottom Harry had never seen before. This Neville surpassed even the boy who had, with the aid of Eutharsos Potion and Mnemonis Potion, beaten Harry at dueling before the entire school. Harry remembered taking Polyjuice Potion during his second year, and Ron telling him how strange it was to see Crabbe (whose form Harry had taken) *thinking*. Looking at Neville now, Harry couldn't help wondering whether someone who was self-possessed and confident had taken Polyjuice Potion to look like Neville. He held out his hand to someone still in the carriage and helped a pretty, creamy-skinned girl with a generous helping of freckles on her face to step from the interior. Like her brother, she also wore a prefect badge. Her long red-gold hair fell to her waist, and her large brown eyes shone happily in the torchlight as she smiled at Neville.

Harry made no effort to close his mouth this time; he'd never seen Ginny appear so *mature*. She looked *happy* too, even happier than she'd been when Draco Malfoy had kissed her after Harry had tied Gryffindor and Slytherin for the Quidditch Cup...

"There he is!" Jamie cried excitedly, pointing down the line of carriages toward where Draco was standing. His hair appeared yellow rather than platinum in the firelight, and his prefect badge glittered. He laughed at something said by someone still in his carriage, then he reached out his hand and helped a girl with dark wiry hair emerge, and she clung to him after she was on the ground, as though she would fall if she did not lean on him for support. Mariah Kirkner looked up at him the way Jamie had been looking at the photograph, but with more of an expression of ownership. Harry looked sideways at his sister, who was frowning. Uh oh, he thought. Competition.

Then he had a memory that made him think that it might be far better if Draco did not think of his sister as dating material...

They crept quietly down the passages between the shelves of dusty books, holding their lit wands high before them.

"Are we close, do you reckon?" Harry asked Draco.

"Getting there. I hid it with the copies of Hogwarts, A History. No one ever reads them, and a book mixed in there about shielding charms would never be noticed..."

"Yeah, well, maybe if we'd prepared sooner than the night before the O.W.L.s, we wouldn't need to be sneaking about the library at midnight, hiding books we don't want others to see..."

"It's fine to say that now, but in nine hours, Flitwick's going to expect us to know this stuff, and I intend to. Studying ahead of time's a waste. There are too many other more enjoyable things to do with my days--and nights--"

Harry thought of the many girls Draco was stringing along at any given time; he knew exactly what his best friend was talking about. Unfortunately, Harry did not have a girlfriend, so he had no real excuse for not being prepared other than not wanting to study alone. Just as they had reached the shelf with its multiple, pristine copies of Hogwarts, A History, they heard the creak of the library door opening.

"Nox!" they both whispered quickly, putting out their wandlights. Harry's heart thumped painfully in his chest as he pressed against the shelves beside Draco, squeezing his eyes shut as though that meant the person who'd just entered wouldn't be able to see him. Steps echoed on the hard floor; Harry held his breath as the person came nearer and nearer. He could hear the person breathing. Was it one of the professors? They would be in so much trouble; maybe they'd

be kept from taking their O.W.L.s. He should never have let Draco talk him into this, he should have been studying while Draco was up in the Astronomy Tower with his succession of girlfriends...

"Lumos!" a feminine voice said. She was standing not three feet away from them. It was Niamh Quirke. Harry groaned inwardly. Head Girl; great. Almost as bad as a teacher. She had as much authority when it came to giving out detentions and deducting house points. The undersides of her nose and chin were eerily illuminated by her wandlight; but although Harry had seen Niamh looking stern before, and giving out detentions and deducting house points, she didn't look like that now. She didn't pay any attention to Harry at all, in fact; just Draco. A slow smile crept across her face...

It happened so fast. Niamh agreed to keep quiet about them being out after hours. She'd overheard them discussing the plan when they were in the library briefly during the afternoon, and she'd come hoping that they wouldn't be gone yet.

"Well, actually, I was hoping you wouldn't be gone yet," she said pointedly to Draco, her eyes burning. Harry saw girls look at his best friend like this often enough; he knew what she meant. He looked at Draco; was he interested? Who was he seeing right now? Susan something...or was it Hannah? It didn't seem to matter to Draco. Here was a girl two years older than him, and Head Girl, no less, offering herself and her silence to him. A slow smile spread across Draco Malfoy's face. Some opportunities were not to be missed.

He held out his hand to her and they walked to a corner in the rear of the library. Harry leaned against the shelves, sighing with relief that they weren't going to be caught, but also in frustration at his own girlfriend-less state (although he didn't really envy his friend these loveless physical encounters that seemed to be his hobby).

Harry heard the rustle of clothing being removed; he heard the unmistakable sounds of kissing, then moans and groans that made him cover his ears with his hands and hum the Holyhead Harpies fight song to himself. When that was done, he counted loudly to himself, ears still covered, eyes squeezed tightly shut. After a while, he opened his eyes, seeing the eerie outlines of the bookcases in the moonlight streaming in the windows. It was very quiet. Harry crept in the direction where he'd seen them go, holding his breath. He slowly put his head around the bookcase on the end, where Draco had

had more than one assignation during the library's daylight hours (clothes usually stayed on then). Draco was leaning on her, trying to get his breath, his arms around her and her legs around him. Harry saw, unmistakably in the stark moonlight, a bare breast, and the nipple very dark at the tip...

He pulled back, embarrassed to his core. They'd just finished and they were still--were still--

He couldn't form coherent thoughts, so he stopped trying and ran to the door of the library. He hoped they hadn't seen him. He wished he had a different best friend, but after so many years at school (and before they'd come to Hogwarts, as well) everyone had their mates, their crowd. If he parted ways with Draco, he'd be alone. Jamie would be very unlikely to join him in the Draco-exodus. He swallowed as he fled the library.

Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea, he thought. Better no friend than one who uses people so blatantly, or who gives no thought to the fact of his best friend being in the room while he's shagging a girl...

He definitely did not want his sister going after Draco Malfoy. Or Draco Malfoy going after his sister. She didn't know about his numerous "conquests." And Harry didn't want her to become one. She wouldn't even be fifteen until February! Then he remembered that Voldemort had told him she was to be born in March. Well, he thought, she must have been born a little early. What was it? He tried to clear his mind of extraneous thought. February--21. That was it. His sister's birthday. He turned to his sister, trying to really see her; he looked at her pure profile in the reflected torchlight bouncing off the window, her freckled nose, her bright green eyes, her chestnut brown hair. Draco probably didn't know she existed anyway, he reasoned. He probably just thinks of her as a sister, Harry tried to reassure himself.

Then he wondered, *Why was Niamh Quirke Head Girl last year?* But he immediately knew; Alicia Spinnet had never been to Hogwarts. She was Muggle-born. She probably didn't even know she was a witch. Harry thought of Hermione again, looking down at the carriages, hoping against hope that she would be here anyway, even though all of the logic was against it.

Most of the carriages had emptied their human cargo, and Harry and Jamie closed the casement and left their stepfather's office to go down to the Great Hall. Did she have any clue at all what a cad her brother's best friend was? Harry wondered. Not that Draco would ever be insulted by such a label; he would laugh and wear it proudly. He didn't let such things get in the way of his fun. Harry both recoiled from this and somewhat envied his friend his ability to disconnect...No, no, he reminded himself. *I do not want to be like that.*

They reached the entrance hall, still thronged with students. "Draco!" Jamie called, her hand raised, her voice carrying above the tumult of voices. The silver-grey head jerked up upon hearing his name, and he smiled charmingly. Harry could see that this response was making his sister *melt*; this year was going to be trouble, he felt. Very big trouble. Draco Malfoy made his way toward them through the crowd. Jamie threw herself on him, and he returned the hug, his nose in her thick, shining hair, his arms spasming across his sister's back longer than Harry would have liked.

"Hey, Draco," he said, trying to sound casual about it. His friend smiled back at him, and then Harry noticed that Mariah had come along with him. He saw now that she too wore a prefect badge. Maybe things will change, Harry thought hopefully. Maybe he'll have a steady girlfriend...

"Let's go!" Draco said to all three of them now. "Let's get good seats!" They worked their way through the crowd, and once in the hall, Harry followed his sister and best friend to one of the long tables, and only after he was seated and noticed where he was did his heart leap into his throat. No, he thought, his breathing growing ragged. This can't be happening. This can't be...

He looked across the hall to where Ron Weasley was sitting with his sister. Neville Longbottom was next to her, and Seamus Finnigan was on the opposite side of the table from them. Katie Bell sat a few students away from Seamus, and there were some other non-Muggle-born students Harry recognized from his other life who were in Gryffindor. The trouble was, he *wasn't* in Gryffindor.

He looked at the people around him.

No, he thought. I'm not. I'm not I'm not I'm not...

I am.

I'm in Slytherin.

He felt tears prickle behind his eyelids. He swallowed, looking around the hall. *I'm in Slytherin. How had this happened?*

But now there were other changes at the school to consider. Up at the staff table, Professor McGonagall was sitting where Professor Dumbledore should be, Harry thought. She was flanked by Professor Vector (she was sitting where McGonagall used to, so Harry thought she might be the deputy headmistress now), and his stepfather, Professor Snape. Harry was still getting used to his new look, his neat short hair and close-cropped beard and mustache, and the fact that he wore a generally *pleasant* expression on his face. His mother did not sit next to his father; she was further along, next to an empty chair.

Other members of the staff were familiar. There was Sinistra; there was Flitwick; there was Trelawney (Harry noted this with a grimace); he saw Madams Hooch, Pince and Pomfrey, an unfamiliar man with horns whom Harry thought he'd last seen at the Ministry of Magic when he'd been there for Lucius Malfoy's trial (which had never happened now). Next to the horned man was Professor Binns.

Professor Binns?

Binns had been at the staff table for things like the announcement of the Triwizard Tournament and the House Cup, but Professor Binns had *never* come down to *eat* at the staff table during all of the years Harry had been at Hogwarts. Of course, during all that time, he'd been a ghost, and ghosts didn't need to eat. However, *this* Professor Binns needed to eat.

He was alive.

Harry closed his gaping mouth before someone threw a Bludger into it. Professor Binns had not died. Whatever circumstances had led up to his simply expiring by the fire in the staff room had not occurred in this world, and Harry saw his History of Magic professor in living color for the first time, red-faced and corpulent, looking like he very much wanted the feast to start, and also looking like a colossal bore. Harry groaned inwardly; the only interesting thing about History of Magic had been Binns drifting through the blackboard at the beginning of class, and clearly that was now out of the question.

Then Harry noticed the dark-haired professor to his stepfather's right; he immediately recognized the handsome, laughing face, as he listened attentively to Professor Sprout, on his other side. It was his godfather, Sirius Black, who now taught Transfiguration. He was not an escaped convict trying to stay one step ahead of the dementors, or even an illegal, unregistered Animagus. He'd been properly registered for years, and had taught in McGonagall's old classroom ever since she'd been elevated to headmistress by the Board of Governors, after Dumbledore's resignation. Sirius--Professor Black--was now head of Gryffindor, Harry remembered. It would have been nice to have his godfather for his head-of-house. His stepfather was head of Slytherin, as ever. Well, that's something, Harry thought; I'm still in good with my head-of-house.

But he was finding this small comfort, indeed, noting how few their numbers were without the Muggle-born students, thinking of all the people he should be seeing and wasn't. No Dean Thomas, he realized, nor his sister Jamaica. He'd already realized that Justin wouldn't be here, and he saw that Ruth Pelta wasn't either, at the Gryffindor Table. Ginny and Ron would never go to her bat mitzvah now, he thought. He did see Tony Perugia at the Gryffindor table, and Harry noticed his prefect badge. Another thing the same. But none of the Muggle-born Gryffindor first years from the year before were sitting there as second-years now. In

fact, he realized, none of the first years who weren't Muggle-born were there either. He looked around the hall. He didn't recognize *anyone* who looked like they were younger than fourth year. There were students who seemed to be the right age to be second and third year, but not one of them was a familiar face to Harry.

Then he thought about when Jamie was born; late February of 1982. She'd been conceived in May of 1981...But Harry recognized quite a few of the other fourth years. Finally, it came to him: October 31, 1981. Any student who would have been conceived after that date no longer existed. The world was completely different after that day than the way it had been in his other life. And even if a couple conceived one day later or earlier, or even *one hour*, or *one minute* later or earlier than in the other timeline, they couldn't possibly create the same person. Harry thought about the Weasley family; the same two parents had produced seven completely different people (nine, if you counted, the lost sisters, but he didn't know them). Each of us being created is a billion to one shot, Harry thought, not really knowing the numbers, but that sounded pretty good to him. He scanned the Gryffindor table for someone who looked like Will Flitwick, hoping he was wrong about this, but he didn't see anyone remotely like Will. All of the younger students were complete strangers to him.

Harry moved his eyes around the Slytherin table; a number of familiar faces, but some people were missing from here, too. His brothers were chatting animatedly with each other as though the tussle in the entrance hall had not occurred. Where were Crabbe and Goyle? he wondered. Surely they had been born...

He turned and tried to unobtrusively check the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. Ah, there they were. They were Hufflepuffs. Why is that? he wondered for a moment, before remembering that he'd seen in the *Daily Prophet* that both of their dads were caught putting the Cruciatus Curse on someone and were sent to Azkaban. What was it, six or seven years ago? Perhaps without their dads' influence they'd become a bit different....Then he didn't see Padma Patil at the Ravenclaw table. Wait--there were two of her at the Gryffindor table. No, he corrected himself; one is Parvati. So, now both Patil twins were in the same house. And one of them was wearing a prefect badge. This was getting very confusing...

The hall grew quiet. Professor Vector rose and walked down the center of the room, her footfalls echoing from the stone walls. Harry raised his eyes to the enchanted ceiling; the sky was littered with stars and the moon was a perfect crescent. Not a cloud drifted in front of the heavenly show. Vector quietly opened one of the huge doors to the entrance hall and then went through to the entrance hall and closed it again. The entire school waited. After a few minutes, both doors opened with a bang! and Professor Vector returned, leading the new first years behind her, small and nervous, and not a Muggle-born witch or wizard among them.

At the end of the line of eleven-year-old boys and girls walked a stocky, muscle-bound red-haired man in worn-looking brown leather pants, a matching leather waistcoat over his homespun shirt, and long, scaly green-leather wizarding robes fastened at his throat with a silver brooch, like a cape. He wore heavy dragon-skin gloves and matching boots, deep green and scaly like his robes. He removed his gloves and strode through the hall behind the first years. Harry immediately recognized him as Charlie Weasley. His hair was slightly damp, and Harry realized that he must be the one who had brought the new students across the lake in the boats.

Harry frowned. Where was Hagrid? Wait; now he remembered. It had become common knowledge that Hagrid was half-giant years ago, before Harry was even a first year. Dumbledore left over the ban on Muggle-born students, and Hagrid was summarily dismissed as groundskeeper during the following year. Since that time, Charlie had been serving as groundskeeper, and since the old teacher left seven years earlier, he'd also been teaching Care of Magical Creatures. But Professor Weasley, Harry knew, slept in the staff wing. The hut where Hagrid used to live had been boarded up and abandoned for years. Professor Charles Weasley took the empty chair next to Harry's mother.

As the children approached the Sorting Hat on the small four-legged stool, Harry's heart went out to them; he'd been utterly terrified when he'd been sorted, in his old life. Now a rip opened near the brim, like a ghoulish maw, and the hat began to sing the song it had been composing for an entire year:

*I'm nothing much to look at
But looks aren't everything.
I've got oh! such a lot of brain
So hear this song I'll sing:*

*Enchanted shoes may make a dancer;
Magic gloves a pianist rare;
But I make you a Hogwarts student
When you put ME on your hair!*

*Every thought you've in your mind
Is an open book to me.
I'll look in you, and tell you true,
Which house is yours, for free!*

*Do you belong in Gryffindor,
With other heroes brave?
Will you run into fire and ice,
Your enemy to save?*

Or do you fit in Hufflepuff,

*That faithful, toiling crew?
Your patience and your loyalty
May show your colors true.*

*But you might be a Ravenclaw,
A clever, savvy sort,
If your wit and erudition show
In matters of import.*

*Or finally, in Slytherin
You may yet find a place.
Ambition and a cunning mind
May hide behind your face.*

*So sit right down and put me on!
I never bite or lunge
It won't last long, I promise you,
So let's all take the plunge!*

Harry groaned; the hat certainly hadn't gotten any better at making up songs. The rest of those assembled burst into applause, and Harry joined in half-heartedly. The hat bowed, acknowledging the acclaim, and then settled onto the stool once more, looking like any other battered old wizard's hat.

Harry saw some of the first years whispering to each other; he wondered what tall tales some of them had heard about the sorting ceremony. Harry remembered that in his other life, Ron had been told by Fred that they had to wrestle a troll. Harry had been afraid that he would have to perform a spell, and Hermione had thought that a possibility as well. *Hermione*. She kept coming back into his mind...How could she not be here? But then, the hat's song reminded him of his sorting ceremony in *this* life...

Harry twisted his hands in his new school robes. All he could see was the back of Draco's head. Professor Vector had led them into the hall and they had waited patiently while the hat sang its terrible song, clapped politely with everyone else, and stood nervously, sweat making his glasses slide down his nose, waiting for his turn on the stool.

"Abbott, Hannah!" called Professor Vector. Harry knew Hannah from the village school in Hogsmeade. Her blonde ponytails bounced as she made her way to the stool. The hat fell down over her eyes. It took only a moment before the hat cried, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The Hufflepuff table burst into cheers, and Hannah was welcomed by her new family, smiling and blushing as she

walked over to them. After that, Susan Bones became a Hufflepuff as well, and Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst became Ravenclaws.

"Brown, Lavender!" Professor Vector called. When she became the first new Gryffindor, that table erupted with noise, and Harry noticed that two red-heads who appeared to be twins were definitely the noisiest. Millicent Bulstrode became a Slytherin; Harry wasn't at all surprised. He also knew her from the village school. Now it was their turn to cheer their new housemate. No one had ever cheered Millicent for any reason, Harry knew. She looked very pleased, trying not to smile as she ducked her head and walked blindly toward the noise.

"Crabbe, Vincent!"

A burly boy sat down on the stool now; it seemed possible that it might not support him, but the legs did not give way. The hat sat on his shoulders for a few minutes before it proclaimed, "HUFFLEPUFF!" The boy took the hat off with a sigh of relief, and walked to the Hufflepuff table, where they seemed to be as happy to have him as the others who had already been placed there.

Then Seamus Finnigan was placed in Gryffindor (the red-headed twins continued to go mad), and Gregory Goyle went to Hufflepuff, where he sat with Crabbe; they seemed to know each other. Neville Longbottom walked with dignity to the stool when his name was called, and when he became a Gryffindor, that table became even wilder.

"MacDougal, Morag!" became a Slytherin, and Harry twisted his robes in his hands; his best friend was up next. What if they didn't get sorted into the same house?

Draco walked to the stool confidently when his name was called; he'd no sooner put the hat on his shoulders than it cried impatiently, "SLYTHERIN," as thought it were so completely obvious the hat shouldn't even have been bothered. Draco took the hat off and rose, looking expectantly at Harry. "Nott" and "Parkinson" became Slytherins as well, then twin girls named Patil both became Gryffindors; after "Perks" went to Ravenclaw, Harry finally heard:

"Potter, Harry!"

No one took any notice of him. Everyone was waiting for the feast; they just wanted to sorting to end. None of the house tables appeared to be interested in such a scrawny, pale

bespectacled boy with unruly hair coming into their house. Harry put the hat on his head, feeling it slip down to his thin shoulders. He stared into the blackness.

"Hmmm," said the disembodied voice, sounding very loud to him, although he hadn't heard anything but the house names when others had been wearing the hat, so he was fairly confident that no one else could hear what the hat was saying to him now. "Interesting. Good mind, very good mind. Brave, I can see that. Talent to spare, oh my. Ambition. That's good, very good. And you don't take insults lying down. I can see that. A very interesting combination. Where shall I put you? Hmmm..."

Harry felt the rough wood under his hands as he gripped the stool. My best friend went into Slytherin, he thought. And my dad is the head of house.

"Slytherin. Yes, an excellent choice. You're brave enough and talented enough for Gryffindor..."

Slytherin, Slytherin. Please.

"...but you would do great things in either place, and Slytherin could help you on your way, no doubt about it..."

Harry waited for the hat's word, wondering whether he was going to be slapped around by the rather frightening-looking red-headed twins at the Gryffindor table. It wouldn't be so bad, he tried to tell himself. My mother and father were Gryffindor. I'd still see Draco a lot...

"SLYTHERIN!" the hat proclaimed. Harry was startled. It was all over. He was in the same house as Draco. He removed the hat from his head and walked over to the Slytherin table, smiling, and Draco patted him on the back when he arrived and started introducing him to the other house members whom he'd just met.

Harry was now a Slytherin.

The sorting was done and Professor McGonagall stood. She cleared her throat and spoke stiffly. "Welcome!" she said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! I will now give out a few notices..."

But the "few notices," went on and on and on. There was the usual prohibition against going into the Forbidden Forest; there was the list of contraband articles (although Harry didn't properly catch the name of the caretaker, it wasn't Filch); there was the announcement of the first

Quidditch match in about a month's time, between Slytherin and Ravenclaw (cheers from Slytherin when they were mentioned and boos from Ravenclaw; cheers from Ravenclaw when their house was mentioned, and extended boos, insults and otherwise rather rude behavior from the Slytherins); there were warnings about leaving school grounds without authorization, and a reminder to those in fourth year and up to return their signed forms to be eligible to visit Hogsmeade on designated weekends. (They must have raised it from third years, Harry thought.)

The notices went on and on. Professor Vector had had this paper published; Professor Sinistra had discovered that new star cluster. Harry leaned his head on his hand. It was all starting to sound like, "Blah, blah, blah..." He stared at his empty plate. *Food. Food. Food.* Maybe if he thought it hard enough, the house-elves would send up the food before she finished talking.

Finally, he heard, "Thank you!" and the headmistress sat. The clapping and cheering was unbelievable; never was a crowd of people more grateful that an orator had shut up. Suddenly, the table was full of food, and Harry and Draco started filling their plates while Jamie looked on disapprovingly. While he ate, Harry heard comments around him from other Slytherins about "that old bat," and "I can't believe she finally decided to shut it." Was this how Slytherin students had talked about Dumbledore before he'd left? Harry wondered. He'd never heard such disrespectful talk at the Gryffindor table.

Then he heard someone further down the table--his own year, he thought--saying, "And just *look* at Evans. As hot as ever...I can't want for Potions...." and then while the boy next to him nodded and agreed, he suggested doing something to his mother that made Harry's throat seize up. He stood angrily and pointed at him.

"Zabini! Detention!"

The Slytherin table was silent, everyone staring at Harry. The other boy frowned at him.

"What?"

"You don't talk that way about a professor," Harry sputtered, remembering that this boy probably didn't know that Professor Evans was his mother. Zabini smirked at him.

"You can't give me detention, Potter. You're not a prefect."

Oh yeah, Harry thought. Damn! When I was a prefect, I never wanted to do this, and now...

"But *I am*," Draco Malfoy drawled, standing slowly. He glared evilly at Zabini. "Detention, tomorrow night with Professor Snape. I'll tell him the reason for the detention, too. You know he doesn't tolerate insubordination against any teacher." Harry looked gratefully at his best friend. He may be a cad with girls himself, but Draco wasn't going to stand for Harry's mother being insulted. Harry suspected that Draco respected Lily Evans far more than he did Narcissa Malfoy. Harry also thought his stepfather would probably be very interested to know what Zabini had been saying about his wife...

He and Draco sat again. Harry glanced around the Slytherin table. Until he'd challenged Zabini, no one here had batted an eye at his mother being discussed in *that* way. He gazed at the Gryffindors wistfully; just as he was doing this, Ginny Weasley had turned and looked in his direction. She caught his eye and smiled. Harry was shocked; he couldn't take his eyes from her. She turned back to the Gryffindors; Harry noticed for the first time that there was a boy at the Gryffindor table who bore an extraordinary resemblance to Neville Longbottom, but he seemed to be a little younger. And then Harry remembered that one of the first years was named Rupert Longbottom, but he was sorted into Hufflepuff, not Gryffindor. He'd noticed Neville frowning about this while the Hufflepuffs cheered. So, in addition to looking very, very in charge of himself, Neville also had two brothers. Did that mean his parents weren't in St. Mungo's? Harry wondered. Did they still work as Aurors? If so, that seemed to be another good thing about this life...

Suddenly, Harry felt a coldness pierce his chest, and he turned to see the Bloody Baron sitting next to him. He drew in his breath; when he exhaled again, he could see it as a small grey cloud before his face, the air around him had become so cold. The ghost's dark, disturbing eyes bored into Harry's. Harry was paralyzed with fear. He felt utterly alone, despite being surrounded by people.

"This is not right," the ghost hissed at him, making Harry's teeth chatter. Everyone around them ignored this interchange. "Fix it."

"What--?" Harry struggled to speak through his shivering. "What do you mean?"

The Baron fixed Harry with a stern and knowing gaze. "You know. You have done this. It is wrong. This is not how it should be."

Harry's bones felt made of ice. "How do you know? Does anyone else?"

"Only those of us who move between worlds. *She* knows, as well. But she does not know she knows." He pointed at the staff table, and Harry turned; the Baron seemed to be indicating Professor Trelawney, who was staring into space, eating her pudding with a blank expression on her face,

her large owlish glasses reflecting the light from the many floating candles above the tables and the torches on the walls.

"But--I--I don't know how to fix it..." he stuttered, turning back to the ghost. He leaned back as the Baron moved his mouth very close to his ear.

"*Find a way.*"

And suddenly, he flew up and up, through the ceiling with its enchanted sky, and was gone. Harry saw Nearly Headless Nick sitting next to Ron at the Gryffindor table. Nick turned to look at him.

Fix it, he mouthed at Harry.

Harry looked at the Hufflepuff table now; the Fat Friar gazed back at him, his dark eyes frightening instead of friendly, as he usually appeared. He shook his head mournfully, turning away from Harry. *The ghosts knew.* They didn't like it; it wasn't right. Harry swallowed, taking in this strange world, the world he--and Voldemort--had created.

The trouble was, if he was going to attempt magic of this magnitude, there were only three people he knew of who might be able to help him. One was Voldemort himself. Bloody unlikely; he'd *wanted* things to turn out this way. Another was Albus Dumbledore, who was no longer headmaster, who didn't approve of changing time, and who could be anywhere doing anything, and probably didn't even know who Harry was, except being the son of his former students. If Harry told him what had happened, he doubted he would be believed.

The third person he knew who might be able to help him was someone else who didn't know him, not anymore. She was probably the smartest witch in England and she didn't even know she was a witch. She was living somewhere as a Muggle, completely oblivious to her own considerable magical powers. Harry knew what he would have to do if he were ever to fix this, if he were to right *this* wrong that had resulted from trying to right the wrong of his mother's death. If this was ever going to be fixed...

He needed desperately to find Hermione Granger.

Chapter Five

The Talented Mr. Potter

Harry followed the other Slytherins down to the dungeons, walked for what seemed miles underground before they reached the nondescript stone wall that hid the Slytherin common room, and followed the others inside after one of the seventh-year prefects gave the password. Harry tried to listen hard; he thought he'd heard the large, surly-looking boy say

"dragon's blood." He remembered the last time he'd been here in his second year, when the password had been "pureblood." Did all the passwords have "blood" in them? he wondered. At least it wasn't "Mudblood."

The common room looked as he remembered it, with the dank stone walls, high-backed chairs near the fire and eerie green lamps hanging from the ceiling, casting a sickening glow over everything. Harry hadn't eaten very much at the feast, but he felt he would spew what he had eaten if he had to sit in that dreadfully-lit room for one minute. He put his hand on his stomach to emphasize his queasiness and said to Draco, "I'm not feeling well. I'm going to bed. See you in the morning." Draco frowned at him.

"You promised to help me with the plans. You've been hinting *all summer* that you had something *absolutely ripping* up your sleeve to really get Weasley. You said that we could stay up all night after the feast, if necessary, working out the details. You know I'm no good at that stuff. I need your devious brain."

Harry grimaced; that's what he was afraid of. Not only wasn't Ron his friend in this life, it seemed that they were downright enemies. Well, he decided, *that* was going to change.

"I'm not interested in that anymore. It all seems so--childish. What do we have against him anyway?"

"What do we--do I have to remind you of the second Quidditch match of last year? Not to mention our last *five* years at school?" Draco was incredulous. Yes, Harry thought irritably, you *do* have to remind me...

"Is there a point to carrying a grudge like this?" he persisted, hoping that he might eventually talk sense into him. "Frankly, I think it's tied my stomach in knots..." He moved to leave again, hoping that his feet would take him to the right room on auto-pilot.

"Is there a *point*? To getting a *Weasley*?" Draco's voice squeaked, he was so incensed.

Harry frowned at him. "Oh, *grow up*," he said as condescendingly as he possibly could before turning away from him. He went through a doorway, looking around at the monotonous grey stone walls; he'd been in the common room here, but never the dorms, and he was tired and irritable and still feeling chilled to the bone after the Bloody Baron had confronted him. He had a choice; corridor on the right or corridor on the left. He chose the left, stumbling along the stone floor, waiting for something to feel familiar. Suddenly, someone opened a door and he ran into Mariah Kirkner, wearing a rather thin nightdress and no dressing gown, carrying a toothbrush. She had emerged from a room that Harry could see had

several four-posters draped in deep green velvet. He glanced across the corridor; she seemed to be heading for a lavatory. The door was ajar and he could see celadon-green tiles on the walls. Mariah smiled at him, standing very close. He tried not to look down at her night dress, but it was so very thin that he was having a hard time bringing his eyes up to her face...

Not only did she not seem to mind this, she smiled even more broadly when she saw where his eyes had gone. He fixed his eyes on her face now, feeling a warmth move up his neck. Wasn't she with Draco? he wondered, remembering the two of them emerging from the horseless carriage before the castle. On the other hand, he didn't seem capable of monogamy; if she was the same that would make it an appropriate pairing.

"Harry!" she said liltingly, her Scottish burr as strong as ever. "Whatayver are ye doin' here?" She put her hand on his arm. "Ye shouldnae see me like this..." she said softly, her avid expression putting the lie to her words. Harry backed up, stumbling. *Wrong corridor*, he thought.

"S-Sorry," he stuttered, still walking backward. "I'm tired. Took a wrong turn. G'night."

He turned then and ran back the other way into the correct corridor, and after passing a few doors, he saw the one labeled *Sixth Years*. He sighed with relief, opening the door. There were four four-poster beds, with the same deep green hangings he'd seen on the girls' side. The same sickly green light shone from the green-shaded candle sconces on the stone walls, and a couple of lamps hanging from the low ceiling. Harry reached his hand up; he could touch the stone above him. It felt like the ceiling was sitting on his *head*. Of course, he was an inch or two taller than he'd been in his other life, but even if he were an inch or two shorter he thought he would find this equally oppressive.

He found his trunk by looking for his initials, *HP*, on the end. Of course, he first found the ones labeled *DM*, *NN* and *BZ*, he thought grumpily. *BZ* would be Blaise Zabini, and *NN*...Norman Nott. That was it. He vaguely remembered Nott from his other life, rather quiet and not a joiner. Harry also remembered that in his other life Nott's dad and Avery had been out-of-favor Death Eaters whom Lucius Malfoy had had killed. Was Norman's dad a Death Eater in this life? Undoubtedly, Harry decided. He felt an unexpected pang of sympathy toward the quiet boy he remembered; he hadn't really thought about the Slytherin student in his other life, he'd been so unobtrusive. He certainly hadn't thought about what he must have been going through when his father was caught after the pub explosion.

Once he'd found his trunk, he did some unpacking and then changed into pajama bottoms to sleep. He put his hand to his sternum, missing the

feeling of the basilisk amulet. He examined himself in the mirror on the wardrobe door. His chest was thin and pale, his ribs far too evident. His hair was just like James Potter's. He sighed. He looked *just like* his father.

He climbed into the bed that had his trunk at the foot and pulled the covers up to his chin; at least the beds were as cozy as in Gryffindor Tower; the house-elves had warmed them and Harry sighed as the comfort seeped into him, finally driving out the cold from his ghostly encounter. He closed his eyes, weariness almost completely overcoming his body, but his brain continued to bash on, giving him no respite.

Fix it. Right, he thought. Easier said than done. Maybe I can try two things at once, he thought. Maybe I can try making this life better, and attempt to find Dumbledore or Hermione in case there's any chance at all I can change things back...But I can't do that unless I become acclimated to this life, understand the way things work. Of course, it would help if I felt like myself...

Then he knew what his first course of action should be: he would take up running again. That would be a good start. And he'd need to make sure he stayed out of trouble; no pranks played against Gryffindors. The last thing he needed was to get in trouble; he'd already been caught by the headmistress fighting with his brothers. Of course, he'd be trying to leave the school grounds without permission to try to locate Hermione...but he would cross that bridge when it was time.

He felt good about his decision to take up running again, and finally felt himself drifting into sleep, part of him hoping and expecting that the entire day, since ten o'clock that morning, had been a mere dream, and he would awake in his nice round room in Gryffindor Tower, with Ron and Neville and Dean and Seamus, and the sunlight would come streaming in the high windows, making the warm red bed-hangings glow, and everything would be all right...

* * * * *

Harry's eyes flew open. The room was pitch dark. He reached for his wand; no matter where he slept, he always put his wand on a table by his bed in exactly the same place and position so that he could pick it up quickly. His wand in hand now, he muttered, "*Lumos!*" Harry looked around, hoping against hope that he would find himself in Gryffindor Tower. But the feeble wandlight shone on the stern, cold Slytherin dorm, green velvet curtains pulled around the other beds, a Slytherin house banner adorning the wall near the heavy wooden door. He noticed now that the wall-sconces with their dormant candles were serpent-shaped.

Harry sighed, wondering what time it was. He felt wide awake and restless. He padded softly across the stone floor in his bare feet, wincing from the cold with every step. Sleeping in a dungeon for seven years

would be bad for anyone's disposition, he felt. No wonder more dark wizards had come from Slytherin than any other house. Of course, I lived under the stairs for ten years, so maybe it's *not* just the environment that makes them turn dark...

He reached Draco's bedside and moved his wand over the table; he found his best friend's watch and put it on. It was six-thirty. He parted the curtains and peered down at the blond boy, sleeping with his mouth open, looking like he was about eight, instead of like the Lothario of Hogwarts. Harry shook his shoulder gently.

"Draco! Wake up!" He got no response. He'd been too gentle. Harry wondered how late he'd been in the common room, and whether he'd given up the idea of getting some kind of revenge on Ron. He shook him less gently and repeated his name a little louder. Draco finally started to stir, struggling to open his eyes.

"Wha--? Harry? Wha's up?"

"Me. But you don't have to be. I just want to borrow your watch. I'll give it to you at breakfast."

"My wa--is *that* all?" he said irritably, punching his pillow and turning over. "Take it," he mumbled into the pillow. "Go 'way." Draco closed his eyes again and resumed sleeping.

Harry closed the curtains. Would I have asked him to borrow his watch the day before yesterday? he wondered. Or would I have just taken it and let Draco wonder who'd nicked it?

After dressing, he left the dormitory, holding his wand aloft. He briefly visited the lavatory, grimacing when the candles on the walls flared to life, assaulting his eyes with far more illumination than his wand. After leaving the echoing, green-tiled room, he lit his wand again and proceeded to the common room. He was about to leave when he realized that he wasn't really dressed appropriately for running. He was fairly sure he had nothing appropriate in his trunk either, so he took off his shirt and transfigured it, then his pants, and lastly his shoes. Now he had a sweatsuit and running shoes. He decided to return to his dorm and retrieve a set of robes and some fresh clothes, shrinking them to pocket-size with some more transfiguration, so that he could shower, change and go to breakfast without returning. He had a feeling he would be spending as little time as possible in Slytherin house.

He walked through the dark underground corridors, trying to remember the turns and forks that he'd taken after the feast, in reverse. *No, he said to himself. Don't try too hard. A part of you knows this, has known it for five years.* He tried to blank his mind and just let his feet go where they wanted, and soon he was passing the Potions classroom, and soon

thereafter he was going up into the entrance hall. He opened the heavy front door and smiled; he'd forgotten how nice sunrise at Hogwarts was. He was facing west, the sky still a deep velvet blue, but as soon as he walked round the castle and started down the dewy lawns to the Quidditch pitch, he could see the pale pink sky over the forest. He remembered waking there, after Fridwulfa had tucked him up for the night between the soft furs....So many things that had never happened now, so many thoughts and memories crammed into his brain...

As soon as he had stretched and started running, he began to feel more like his old self. But when he found himself flagging after only three circuits around the sandy path he realized that this body was not used to the pace he was setting for himself. He remembered how winded he had felt after his first time running from the Dursleys' house to the park and back. He didn't feel as bad as that, but he didn't feel like doing more just now. I'll have to work my way up again, he thought.

After some warm-down exercises he started to head back to the castle, then stopped. He remembered that he no longer had *carte blanche* to use the prefects' bathroom, and he didn't know the password anyway, even if he'd wanted to sneak in. That meant going all the way back to the Slytherin dorm to shower. Instead, he headed back to the Quidditch pitch; there were showers in the changing rooms. He entered, shivering; for some reason it was colder in here than outdoors. He put a warming charm on the floor before he showered, then dressed and transfigured his running clothes again, this time to make *them* small enough to fit unobtrusively into his robe pockets (after transfiguring his other clothes back to normal size). He was about to leave, as it was now eight o'clock, but he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and frowned. He closed his eyes and concentrated as hard as he could. Finally, he felt a familiar tingling over his entire scalp. When he opened his eyes, he smiled. He had his old haircut, from his old life. Good. Something else to make me feel normal. He was about to shave, then decided that there wasn't *that* much of a shadow on his face, and he left for the castle.

When he reached the Great Hall, it was already noisy with breakfast conversation. The smaller number of students was starting to look normal to him, but he didn't notice that this reduced the noise reverberating from the stone walls. He sat down at the Slytherin table between his sister and his best friend.

"Where've you been?" Jamie asked between bites of toast. "And what did you do to your hair?"

Harry helped himself to some sausages and eggs; the running had given him an appetite he hadn't had during the welcoming feast. "Running. Down at the Quidditch pitch," he said shortly. "I changed it. My hair, I mean. Tired of the old look." He resumed eating, then turned to look at his silent sister. She had tears in her eyes. "Jamie--what's wrong?"

She snuffled, reaching for some jam for her toast. "So, you're tired of looking like our father, are you?"

He had not expected this reaction. "Er, I just--you know--wanted to look like *myself*." He squirmed, not wanting his sister to think he was showing disrespect to their father's memory. Did he have to make his appearance a permanent shrine to his father? he wondered.

"Well, You-Know-Who's going to have a melt-down when she sees you. And you haven't shaved."

"You-Know-Who is a *she*? Since when?"

Jamie looked around at the other students. "You know which You-Know-Who I mean. Don't act dumb."

He was going to say it wasn't an act, but he realized that wouldn't sound quite right, so he instead looked toward the head table, and sure enough, his mother was looking at him with her eyebrows raised and a pointedly disappointed expression on her face. Great, he thought. No one cared when I did this before; now I've got a sister and mother breathing down my neck about a simple change in hair...

But the reaction wasn't all bad. Pansy Parkinson was smiling very broadly at him, Millicent Bulstrode kept dropping her silverware and flushing every time he looked her way (she tried to pretend she wasn't looking back), and Mariah Kirkner simply kept gazing at him without pause, eating and drinking as though she found him so completely mesmerizing she had no choice but to remain riveted on him throughout. Harry turned to glance surreptitiously at the other tables; some Gryffindor girls had noticed him as well. Parvati Patil was giving him a look of surprise similar to that his mother had given him (without the hostility), and Ginny was smiling at him again. This time he smiled back at her, not turning away until Ron Weasley, next to her, turned and glared at him. Harry sighed, returning to his food; he had to do something about Ron. He missed his *real* best friend and wanted him back. He slid his eyes sideways to look at Draco Malfoy. Draco *could* be all right when he wanted to be. But he wasn't Ron, not by a long shot. He turned and looked back at the Gryffindor table; this time the Weasley at whom he gazed wistfully was not Ginny, but Ron.

When breakfast was almost over, Harry asked Draco, "So, what do we have today?"

"Why don't you have your stuff with you? We have Transfiguration with the Ravenclaws, first thing. That's three flights up. You'll miss half of class, going back to the dungeons for your things. After that we have Dark Arts with the Hufflepuffs. That's one floor up from Transfiguration. There's no way for you to get the stuff between classes without being late for that one, either."

That's funny, thought Harry. We never used to have those classes in combination with other houses. Then again, the school used to have a few more students...Suddenly he had a brainstorm about how he'd get his parchments, books, quills and ink.

"What's after lunch?"

"Potions, then Charms. Both with the Gryffindors, unfortunately. We have to put up with Weasley all afternoon. No free period today. What, are you going to wait until lunch to get your stuff?"

"Don't worry. I'll do it right now. What do we have, fifteen minutes or so before we have to start upstairs?"

"I think..." Draco began, looking at his wrist; then he looked at Harry's.
"Hey! You took my watch!"

"I *asked* you and you said to take it and go away."

"*When* did I ever say to take it?"

"At six-thirty this morning."

"What in bloody hell were you doing up at six-thirty?"

"I told you; running. You were half-asleep; I was afraid you wouldn't remember. Here." He gave it back to him.

"You can get up for running at six-thirty, but you can't remember to bring up your things for class? It's a half-hour hike down to our dorm. An hour round trip."

"I know. I've got it covered. Something that's faster than walking. Come on."

He rose and his sister and best friend followed him. He led them out of the Great Hall, through the entrance hall and down the steps to the dungeons. At the foot of the steps he stopped. Flickering torches provided the only light. He pulled out his wand and stared into the semi-darkness, concentrating on his rucksack, books, parchment, quills and ink bottles in his trunk at the foot of his bed. He pictured each item in his mind, very clearly. Finally, he cried, "Accio!" The sound echoed off the stone walls, gradually dying out. A minute passed, then two, three. His brow still knit in concentration, he kept his wand out, waiting, waiting, waiting.

Finally, when almost ten minutes had passed, they could see the objects hurtling toward them at breakneck speed. At last, when it seemed that the three of them might be impaled by the quills, spattered by the ink bottles

and battered by the books, Harry, his wand still pointed down the corridor, cried, "*Impedimenta!*"

The objects hung in mid-air, stopped dead by the second charm. Harry walked forward about ten feet and plucked his supplies from the air, including his rucksack. He put his things in the bag and slung it over his shoulder, then turned to look at his friend's and sister's shocked faces.

"What?"

They were speechless at first. Finally, Jamie was able to form words. "When did you get so good at summoning charms? And what was that other thing?"

"It slows things down so that they look like they've stopped completely. They're actually still moving, just really, really slowly. Oh, that reminds me." He pointed his wand at his bag. "*Finite Incantatem!*" He looked up at his sister again. "Can't have it continue to move--even a little--now that I've got it."

She continued to stare, then grabbed Draco's wrist, twisting it into an uncomfortable position that made him yell in pain. But he didn't do anything to stop her, or retaliate. After glancing at his watch she shouldered her own bag and ran for the stairs. "I'll be late for Charms. See you at lunch!"

They both called goodbye to her, then started climbing the stairs themselves. As they walked, they were quickly joined above the first floor by other sixth-year Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Harry saw that his friend kept looking sideways at him with a suspicious expression. Finally Harry couldn't take it any more.

"What's with you? You'd think you two had never seen a person do a summoning charm before."

"No, you'd think we'd never seen *you* do a summoning charm. There's a difference."

"Well, I got it right, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but--"

"Well then let's drop it."

They had reached the Transfiguration classroom. Harry entered with a smile, looking forward to a class with his godfather. They filed in with the other Slytherins in their year, plus a half-dozen Ravenclaws that Harry remembered from his other life. Evan Davies wore a prefect badge, as did Mandy Brocklehurst. One of the other boys was Felix Moon and one was

Terry Boot, but he wasn't sure which was which. He also recognized Lisa Turpin and Sally-Anne Perks. Along with Norman Nott, Blaise Zabini, Morag MacDougal, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, their number was thirteen. A perfect coven, Harry thought with a grin. Trelawney would be having a fit.

"Good morning!" Sirius said to them with a friendly smile as they took their seats. He again looked like the handsome best man in Harry's parents' wedding photos, instead of a fugitive from wizarding justice. "Sixth year Ravenclaws and Slytherins, correct?"

"Slytherins and Ravenclaws," Draco Malfoy corrected him. He smiled at Draco.

"Hello again, Draco. Had a good summer?" Draco smiled back at him; good, thought Harry, he and my best friend get along. And he's the sort of teacher who uses first names, instead of last. He smiled at Sirius too, and looking less jovial now, Sirius nodded at him.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry frowned just a little, wondering at this lukewarm greeting. The other students then began babbling to him about their holidays; he was clearly a very popular teacher, and he listened attentively for a few minutes before clapping his hands and gesturing for them all to sit.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you all had wonderful adventures on your holidays and I'll eventually hear about all of them. But right now we need to begin. This is your sixth year. You all did quite well on your O.W.L.s; I was very, very pleased with every one of you." He beamed at them all. "But now you have only two years to prepare for your N.E.W.T.s. That's not as much time as you might think. We are going to begin Advanced Transfiguration this year. In the past, you have Transfigured inanimate objects and small animals. This term we will begin to Transfigure larger animals and objects, eventually progressing to--" He paused, looking around at them all. "--Transfiguring each other."

A couple of people gasped; Harry and Draco looked at each other with alarm. Learning to do the Animagus Transfiguration was one thing, Harry thought. I'm not sure I want *someone else* Transfiguring me. He remembered Draco Malfoy the Amazing Bouncing Ferret, and almost guffawed from the memory, but caught himself in time, biting his tongue. His godfather gave him a stern look and his best friend frowned at him. It's a good thing Draco can't read minds, Harry thought.

"As seventh years, you will then learn how to Transfigure *yourselves*. These will be spells of short duration, and require wands, unlike the Animagus Transfiguration, which is done thusly," he said, suddenly disappearing, to be replaced by a large black dog. In a blink, their teacher

was back, with his black hair and eyes and deep maroon robes. "However, even if we determine during your seventh year that one of you--and I would be very surprised if there is *even* one of you among *all* of the seventh years--who has the aptitude to become an Animagus, you may or may not be able to study to become one. The Ministry must now approve an application to begin Animagus study, with detailed information submitted concerning *why* you wish to become an Animagus. The last I heard, the application process is up to sixteen months, and no one has been approved since I received my Animagus license fifteen years ago. They only instituted the application requirement ten years ago, but still, no one has even been approved to *attempt* it in all that time. So I wouldn't exactly expect to become an Animagus before finishing your seventh year, any of you."

Harry pondered this; why was the Ministry controlling this so tightly now? Professor McGonagall had simply begun training him after she'd discussed it with Dumbledore. "It's a good thing they didn't have that rule when you were in school," he said to Sirius, smiling.

Harry's smile evaporated a second later when his godfather, glaring at him, said softly, "In the corridor, Potter. Now." No more first name.

Harry rose with trepidation and followed Sirius out the door, looking over his shoulder at his best friend, who was grimly waving goodbye to him, as though he didn't expect to see him again. Once in the corridor, his godfather turned to him, looking as though he was barely under control.

"*What* did you mean by *that*?" he demanded of Harry. Although Harry had seen Sirius Black angry, he had never seen him angry at *him*, in this life or his previous one.

He stared at the older man, unsure where to begin. "Well, um," he struggled. "You know. The way you and my father and--and Pettigrew became Animagi so you--so you could be with Remus Lupin when he--you know--" he peered at his godfather nervously. He glared even harder at Harry.

"*How* do you know about *that*?"

Oh no, Harry thought, remembering his conversation with his stepfather the previous evening. Not again. "Oh, you know. I've--heard things. Over the years. Here and there."

"Here and there," his godfather repeated, pacing, running his hands through his hair restlessly. "Not 'down at the Quidditch pitch'?"

Now Harry was the one who was confused. "Down at the Quidditch pitch? How would I hear about this down at the Quidditch pitch?"

Sirius straightened up and cleared his throat. "Oh, nothing. Forget I said anything." His expression softened. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's just that you have to remember that in the classroom, you're just another student, not my godson. You're very good at Transfiguration--I gave you two O.W.L.s, didn't I? But I can't risk anyone thinking I'm giving you preferential treatment."

Harry bristled. "I earn my marks."

"Yes, you do. I just--let's not make any more remarks concerning things you've heard in private conversations in your home, hmm? Let's not remind people we have a personal connection." He looked more kindly at Harry now. Harry nodded. "Oh, and Harry--nice haircut." He smiled even more now, and Harry smiled back. So, he could get along with his stepfather and--to a certain extent--his godfather. Why not his mother?

Harry and his godfather returned to the classroom and the rest of the class time passed without incident. They didn't do any spells but took copious notes on the hazards of Transfiguring oneself or others, which made splinching oneself while Apparating sound like a holiday at the seaside. Harry remembered Viktor Krum's botched shark Transfiguration during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. He wondered whether he could still do the golden griffin Transfiguration, and he decided to try later, when he could find someplace private. He'd managed to alter his hair, after all. That seemed like a good sign.

One father down, one to go, he thought, as the Slytherins split from the Ravenclaws, who were going to Binns' classroom next. The Slytherins ascended the stairs to the Dark Arts classroom, meeting up with the sixth-year Hufflepuffs.

"Where are you lot coming from?" Millicent asked Ernie MacMillan, standing rather close to him.

"The greenhouses," Hannah Abbott answered her, coming between her and Ernie. "Herbology with the Gryffindors."

"Of course it was with the Gryffindors, who else would it be? Why bother to say?" Draco sneered at her, then rolled his eyes at Harry and muttered, "Hufflepuffs."

Harry felt bad for Hannah, who gave Draco a hurt look, which he seemed to find amusing. As he scanned the half-dozen Hufflepuff students, he again noted the absence of Justin Finch-Fletchley. I suppose he's at Eton, Harry thought, playing football and cricket, and wondering why he sometimes makes strange things happen when he gets over-excited. At least he's never known what it's like to be petrified by a Basilisk.

Harry and Draco took seats front and center. Severus Snape was not deigning to notice that students were entering the classroom, despite the noise and jostling that unavoidably accompanied the advent of thirteen teenagers. He continued to placidly write on the blackboard; not a speck of chalk dust dared to leap onto his pristine black robes. Must have put a dust-repelling charm on them, Harry thought. It would be like his stepfather.

He finally finished writing, punctuating his final sentence with an emphatic period that broke the piece of chalk he had been using. He ignored this and turned around, surveying all of the students, including Harry, with what appeared to be intense dislike. Hmm, Harry thought. Maybe some things haven't really changed. He still doesn't seem to actually *like* being a teacher.

But suddenly, his dad's face was split by an absolutely blinding smile. "Welcome back! It's good to see you all again!" Harry could have fallen off his chair in shock. Also shocking was the way Pansy and Millicent were looking down at their parchments shyly, and even Hannah seemed to have forgotten that Ernie existed momentarily. His dad's dark hair gleamed, brushed back from his brow, and his beard was neat and close-trimmed. His nose still had that downward hook, but that hardly seemed to matter; the girls all seemed to think it was charming. Then Harry realized that his new haircut was *identical to his stepfather's*. And since he hadn't shaved, he appeared to have a close-trimmed beard and mustache. It looked as though he'd been imitating him! Harry sank down into his chair, wondering what his dad would say (and making a mental note to shave before his afternoon classes).

But no comment was forthcoming on his hair, facial or otherwise. "Please take out your quills and parchment and copy down the notes on the board! Then we will be going on a little trip, as it were."

He sat down at his desk to wait for the class to finish copying the notes. Harry started copying, then paused when he realized that the notes were all about boggarts. *Haven't we covered boggarts yet?* he wondered. That's odd...but try as he might, he could not dredge up a memory of learning about boggarts in this life. He shrugged and wrote quickly.

When everyone had put their quills down, his dad stood again. "Now! We will be going down to the kitchens. Mr. White, the caretaker, has reported that the house-elves have found a boggart in the potato pantry. We will flush it out and then confront it. Now, since the boggart takes on the form of your worst fear, do any of you think you know what form your boggart might take?"

Slytherin and Hufflepuff alike looked at each other in bewilderment. Only Harry slowly raised his hand. His dad nodded at him.

"All right. Potter. That's one." Now Fiona Fawcett also raised her hand, looking nervous. He acknowledged her, then said, "No one else?" The others still looked baffled. Well, Harry thought, we'll find out soon.

They marched down the stairs to the entrance hall, then continued down to the kitchen. When they reached the painting of the bowl of fruit, Harry instinctively reached out to tickle the pear to get it to turn into a doorknob. His best friend and stepfather frowned at him.

"How did you know to do that?" his dad asked him quietly as Harry held the door open for the others. Harry felt like kicking himself. Instead, he shrugged and raised his eyebrows. His dad surveyed him suspiciously as they entered the kitchens.

Everything was as Harry remembered it. House-elves were zipping about, busily preparing lunch dishes. They ignored Severus Snape and his students, dancing nimbly around them with their burdens or disappearing with abrupt *pops!* or *cracks!*, and appearing again across the room. Harry found it quite entertaining, actually (now that he wasn't trying to wrestle cleaning flannels from them) and could have happily watched the house-elves work until lunch, but he followed his classmates to the area behind the large black stove. He noticed that Crabbe was looking at the house-elves with large eyes and scurrying behind the stove as quickly as possible.

They had to descend a flight of steep stairs to reach the potato pantry; its location was even further underground than was necessary, so that the potatoes were guaranteed to be cool and dry. They passed a door labeled *ONIONS* which Harry's stepfather gave a wide berth. Finally, he stood with his hand on the knob of the room labeled *POTATOES*. The tall professor looked round at them all.

"Now, then. We have been practicing hexes and curses for five years. Certainly by now you should be able to combat almost anything this creature will become, no matter how horrible. Wands out! Is everyone ready?"

The students nodded nervously. Harry thought he was probably ready, but then he doubted; what if in *this* life he had a different fear? What if it *wasn't* a dementor? He tried to remind himself to be prepared for whatever he would see, and he tried to remember all of the things he'd learned for the Triwizard Tournament and the Dueling Club. Concentrate, he told himself. And remember--it's just a boggart. Whatever it *seems* to be, it's not, really.

Severus Snape put his hand on the door handle and prepared to pull back the catch. He then reached out and randomly grabbed Pansy Parkinson's arm and pulled her toward the door.

"You will be first. Everyone else, hang back. Give her a clear field. As I call your name, come forward to confront it. Do not hesitate. You will lose marks if you do. I will be judging your work based on your promptness and the appropriateness of the response. I am not here to judge your fears. Now, give Parkinson some room." He nodded at her. "Ready?" She looked like she might cry. "Too bad. It's time." Harry thought that was a bit callous, but suddenly, the door was opening and his stepfather had backed off with the others, leaving Pansy standing alone in the pantry doorway, peering into the darkness. Nothing happened. They all waited.

"He-hello?" she inquired uncertainly into the silence.

Suddenly, a roaring yeti appeared in the irregular polygon of light in the open doorway. Pansy screamed and ran up the stairs to the kitchen. Professor Snape sighed.

"Fawcett!"

Fiona stepped forward, looking nervous but determined. The boggart immediately became a werewolf, fangs slavering, eyes red and unfocused. She uttered a charm and turned the end of her wand into a silver-tipped spear, stabbing the beast viciously in the breast. Harry was jolted; he didn't know her well, but he wouldn't have thought her capable of violence, even in self-defense. Then she withdrew (his stepfather was smiling and nodding at her) and Millicent Bulstrode took her place. The boggart was now a twelve-foot high mountain troll, and Harry remembered with a pang how he and Ron and Hermione had become friends in their first year...

He let his mind wander and didn't see how Millicent handled the troll, but she was now stepping aside for Ernie MacMillan, who was confronting a low-slung five-legged beast covered with reddish-brown hair. It had a gash of a mouth, numerous jagged teeth, and each of its five legs (which protruded from its head like a five-legged spider) ended in a club foot. Ernie cried out his charm and the beast immediately became a Scotsman, complete with kilt, sporran and ghillie shoes, tam and bagpipes. The Scotsman looked quite confused.

Ernie was waved aside and Susan Bones took his place. The Scotsman was gone; in its place was a spherical, mottled fish standing on two long legs which ended in webbed feet. Susan hexed it and stepped aside for Hannah. The fish disappeared and became a small, smooth grey rock. Hannah stood facing it, sweat standing out on her forehead, her wand out, when finally hairy legs appeared beneath it and it stood; it was barely a foot tall. Hannah cried out, "Stupefy!" and it immediately rolled over. Draco came forward now, and the unconscious rock immediately metamorphosed into a cat, which reminded Harry remarkably of Crookshanks. Large, orange and truculent, the cat sprang at Draco's head. He screamed and pointed his wand at it, crying, "*Expelliarmus!*" Harry

grimaced; the stupid cat wasn't armed; what was he trying to do, declaw it? He looked at his dad, who waved Draco aside.

It turned into a leprechaun for Goyle and a fire for Morag (who correctly used the *Fluvius* charm to aim water at it from her wand). Then his stepfather cried, "Potter!" and Harry stepped forward nervously, wondering what he would see. The boggart sensed a new presence, a new fear, and it changed.

It was a dementor.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He glared at it, fighting against the cold that wanted to seep into his bones, into his soul. He drew on his happiest thoughts (which all involved Hermione) and cried, "*Expecto Patronem!*"

Immediately, a white stag sprang from his wand tip, running around the dementor, driving it back into the pantry. Before it could retreat altogether, his dad pulled him aside and cried, "Crabbe!"

The stocky, confused-looking boy stepped forward and the dementor became a dozen house-elves, flitting about Crabbe, *cracking!* in and out of the space around the boy's head. He looked like he was going to cry. Like Pansy, he went running up the stairs, only to come back immediately, crying, "There's more up here!"

The collected students found it impossible not to laugh. (Harry tried not to but it was just too hard.) Amid the laughter, his stepfather cried, "Riddikulus!" and the boggart burst into small pieces like minute shards of glass, and those shards broke up too, smaller and smaller, until there was nothing but a fine powder on the already-dusty floor of the corridor outside the pantries.

Professor Snape was smiling and nodding at them all. They climbed the stairs back up to the kitchens, (Crabbe still trying to avoid the house-elves) and then left and proceeded up to the entrance hall. Once there, he turned to speak to the class.

"Well, *almost* all of you did very well. I see some weaknesses that we can address, but it is just the first day of term. There will be time for all that. I am sorry that you did not get a chance, Nott and Zabini," he said to the other two Slytherin boys, "but after all of that laughter," and his eyes actually twinkled at Crabbe, "the boggart just wasn't going to survive much longer. We'd played with it long enough. Class dismissed."

It was just a few minutes before lunch, and the sixth-year Hufflepuffs and Slytherins entered the Great Hall with relief, talking excitedly about the whys and wherefores of their various fears.

"What was that thing, Ernie?" Hannah asked him.

"My mum told me about it; I haven't been able to forget it. Her family's from northern Scotland. It's a Quintaped, sometimes called a Hairy MacBoon. But it's actually a Transfigured Scotsman. It's a long story..."

"Harry," his dad said to him softly, before he could follow Draco into the Great Hall. Harry turned to his stepfather, wondering what he wanted to say that warranted him using his first name in a place where others might hear. The older wizard walked to the front doors and opened them, and Harry followed. After the doors were closed again, his stepfather sat on the top step of the entrance stairs, and Harry sat next to him. He looked at Severus Snape's profile for a minute, then turned to look out at the road to Hogsmeade, and the homely skyline in the distance, the thatched and tiled roofs, the bell tower of the village hall. *Home.* The sun was almost overhead, but not quite; there was still a small amount of shade to protect his stepfather's sensitive skin.

It was Harry who finally spoke. "You want to know about the Patronus."

"Yes."

Harry shrugged. "There's not much to tell..."

"Well, how about this: why are you more frightened of dementors than anything else?"

Harry shrugged again. "I suppose my greatest fear is--fear."

His dad nodded. "Very wise. And you knew about this being your greatest fear? That's why you learned how to conjure a Patronus?"

"Yes." It was a completely truthful answer. It was a skill learned in another life, but he wasn't being asked where and when he learned it, just why. His stepfather didn't press the issue.

"That was some Patronus."

"Yes."

"Interesting form it took."

Harry squirmed now. "Yes," he said more softly. Partly to change the subject and partly because he really wanted to know, he asked, "What does it become for you?"

Severus Snape looked startled. "It--never mind." Harry wondered if it would have been a werewolf for him, as it was for Fiona. He'd looked very satisfied about her reaction to it. Harry remembered the Pensieve, watching James Potter save his life...

His stepfather stood, brushing some nonexistent dirt from his flawless robes again. "Never mind," he repeated. "Let's go eat," he said simply. Harry nodded and followed him back into the castle.

He paused near the doors after they were closed, watching his dad stride purposefully into the Great Hall. The bell rang and suddenly Harry heard a rumbling noise, and the floor where he stood actually began to *shake* as almost the entire population of the school descended (or in some cases, ascended) the steps to the entrance hall, which was suddenly full of students in black Hogwarts robes with bulky rucksacks. Harry stood back as they streamed into the Great Hall. In a few minutes it was quiet again. Harry put his hand up to his face, feeling the progression of the hair growth since the morning. He looked around, ducked down the staircase to the dungeons, then pulled out his wand and started to shave. He hadn't gotten very far, however, when a girl who was one of the last to emerge from the Potions dungeon ran right into him.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She hadn't been looking at him but at her companion. Harry recognized the girl who apologized as Annika Olafsdottir. The other girl was Ginny Weasley. For no reason he could think of, Harry felt himself blush; Ginny smiled warmly at him.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked him teasingly. Harry didn't know what to think.

"I--er--well--this may sound strange, but I forgot to shave this morning. I was going to take care of it before lunch."

She looked at him appraisingly and Harry shivered. "You look all right to me." She smiled at him again over her shoulder as she followed Annika up the stairs to the entrance hall. Harry swallowed, staring after her. Am I crazy? he wondered. Or is she giving me the come-hither in big, bright neon letters? Or whatever wizards use instead of neon? Or maybe wizards discovered neon first? Or--oh hell, he thought. What is she *doing*?

He turned and started going down the stairs again and ran right into his mother. He hadn't noticed that she hadn't emerged from the dungeons yet. He wondered whether she preferred to come this way instead of using the short-cut from her office to the Great Hall.

"Harry," she said, not sounding especially pleased. "What are you doing here?" She didn't comment on his hair and unshaven face.

"I--um--wanted to put my bag in the Potions dungeon before lunch. Is that okay?"

She scrutinized him; he tried to remember whether she had appeared to believe a single word he'd said since yesterday morning. "That's fine. After that you'd better get upstairs for lunch. Don't be late for class."

"Yes, ma'am," he said meekly, continuing down the steps past her and proceeding to the classroom. Once inside, he put his bag down in the corner and finished shaving himself with his wand. At least now he wouldn't look like he was *completely* emulating Severus Snape. He wondered if Ginny would still think he looked all right...No, no, he shouldn't be thinking about Ginny.

Why shouldn't I be thinking about Ginny? a different part of his brain said. He remembered the way she'd been smiling at him since the welcoming feast. *She* certainly didn't seem to harbor bad feelings toward Slytherins, even if her brother did. (He had no evidence of this as yet, but based on Draco's complaints about spending all afternoon with Weasley and given that he was supposed to be planning some sort of spectacular revenge with Draco, he didn't think this was going out on a limb.)

He thought about Ginny again, and then he thought about her in a different way...A memory rose up from somewhere in his muddled, crowded brain, something from when he was younger...

He was ten years old and more excited than he ever remembered being. The Quidditch World Cup hadn't been canceled after all, as the International Confederation of Wizards had threatened to do because of rumblings of dark wizard activity. It was to be held in Spain, in some unplotable foothills near which Basque separatists had supposedly been fighting for years. That was just a wizarding ruse; the Basque separatists were actually magical communities trying to keep Muggles at bay, and the seeming-political instability in the region had accomplished that goal. Harry and his stepfather and brothers were going; his mother didn't want to come, and his sister was staying home with her. Jamie wasn't overly fond of Quidditch.

Sweden was playing Greece. Harry's dad and brothers had to spend a lot of time covering themselves with salve to protect themselves from the harsh Spanish sun, and Harry found himself growing bored while he was waiting for the match to start; they had middling seats, near Sweden's goals. Harry was still undecided about whether he was cheering for them or for Greece. He much preferred the Greek food he'd had so far (he'd finished his spinach pie quickly and was getting very sticky from some delicious baklava), but just in case, he'd collected small flags from each country, which were in his pockets.

He wished for a pair of omnioculars when he saw a tall red-haired man buy some for his children, but Harry knew that wasn't going to happen. Before they'd left, his mother had cautioned his dad against being badgered for "trinkets;" he

knew they were on a very strict travel budget. A wizard ferry had brought them across the English Channel; the magical ferries never had the dreadful accidents experienced by Muggle watercraft, as they actually hovered slightly above the surface of the ocean. These ferries appeared quite normal from a distance (if one ignored the fact that all of the passengers were wearing wizarding robes).

Once in France, they'd taken a Portkey to Spain. The British and Spanish Ministries of Magic were not on speaking terms and so they could not take a Portkey directly to Spain from England. France's Ministry of Magic was--for a time--friendly with both countries' Ministries and so agreed to act as a way-station for travelers to the World Cup. Harry had never before experienced that sickening feeling of the hook behind his navel, rushing-through-space sensation, and the awkward landing. Because of these side-effects of traveling by Portkey, it was not recommended that people use Portkeys to go to France, then another to Spain. One needed a proper rest spell between using Portkeys or one could become quite ill.

When they arrived in Spain, his dad and brothers immediately started in on the salve; usually at least one of the twins complained about this, but they were so anxious to see the World Cup that for once there was no whining.

Harry glanced again at the red-haired man; he seemed to have quite a lot of children, all red-haired like him. Harry saw two who were calling him dad but were clearly already grown up (the stocky, muscular one looked familiar); a thin bespectacled boy of around fourteen, mischievous-looking twins a little younger than that, a tall, thin boy about ten years of age, like Harry, and a delicate-looking girl who was probably a little younger. Oddly, the stocky grown-up brother and the girl and youngest boy seemed most interested in being there. The boy with the glasses had his nose buried in a book and the eldest brother was flirting with a dark-haired witch who was gazing at him appreciatively. The twins were huddled together, laughing, in a world of their own.

Harry noticed that the girl especially had shining eyes as she watched the pre-game show. There were Quidditch players from Spain's national team (which had been eliminated a year earlier) doing flying formations that were quite impressive. She looked like she was itching to grab a broomstick and emulate them. Harry watched them for a minute; he knew exactly how she felt. He wanted to be on a broomstick right now, going into a dive, banking and twisting...

When he looked at her again he discovered that she was gazing back at him. She had very large brown eyes in a rather thin face, and her hair was a bit messy, like her father's. She was extremely pale and seemed almost more likely to burn in the hot sun than Harry's dad and brothers, who had gone to speak to his dad's uncle from Dunoon. Harry grimaced, looking over at him; he liked Uncle Duncan and all, but he had actually worn a kilt to the World Cup. In Spain. Harry was glad that he wasn't near his dad and brothers and uncle at this moment; he didn't want the girl to know he was with them. He smiled nervously at her; she was pretty in a waifish way. He wondered whether she was from Sweden, or maybe Germany. She probably didn't speak any English. Oh well, Harry thought; maybe I can learn a little of another language.

He edged over to her; she was only about five seats away, on the same level as Harry, and the intervening seats hadn't been taken yet. The brother with the glasses had taken the twins and the boy around Harry's age somewhere, and the eldest brothers were keeping an eye on their little sister. Harry hoped they didn't think he looked threatening.

"Hello," he said to her. She smiled back. Harry felt sure she wouldn't be doing this if she understood, but he pressed on. "Do you speak English?" he asked her, very distinctly and slowly. She laughed then, her eyes crinkling up and dimples appearing in each cheek; Harry wouldn't have thought it possible for her to be any prettier, but now she was.

"Do you? Of course I speak English!" She was still laughing. Harry felt himself flush. She had an English accent, although not precisely like his. He couldn't place it.

"Oh. I thought you might be Swedish. Where do you live?"

"Just outside of Ottery St. Catchpole."

Harry nodded as though he knew where that was. "I live in Hogsmeade."

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up. "Hogsmeade! I wish we lived there. Then maybe mum would let us go to school..."

"You don't go to school?"

"Mum used to be a teacher at the Hogsmeade school. She teaches us at home. Well, just me and Ron now. He'll be a first year at Hogwarts next September. Fred and George just finished their first year--they're twins. They can't wait to try

out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team in September. There's openings for Beaters. That's their favorite pastime; wreaking havoc." She smiled; Harry wasn't sure he'd ever met a nine-year-old girl who talked like her.

"I'll be a first year next year too."

"Really? What house do you want to be in? Everyone in my family's always been in Gryffindor, but Ron's really worried he'll be a Hufflepuff or something."

"My mother and father were both in Gryffindor, but my dad--" He was about to say his dad was head of Slytherin house, but he remembered that Slytherins and Gryffindors didn't get along as a general rule, and decided against it.

"What about your dad?" Harry realized that she probably thought his 'father' and his 'dad' were the same person.

"Oh, nothing. Is your mum here?"

"Nah. She's not interested."

Harry smiled. "You mean she's sick of hearing about Quidditch morning, noon and night. That's what my mum and sister said. That's why they're not here."

"You have a sister? How old is she?"

"Eight. She's all right too, as sisters go. She's actually one of my two best friends in the whole world."

"Wow." She was silent for a moment, looking down. "None of my brothers would ever call me one of their best friends. I'm usually just in the way." Harry thought she looked rather sad. She sighed and looked up again, as though she were determined to put a good face on things. "I can't wait to go to Hogwarts. My brother Charlie works there. That's him." She pointed to the stocky brother, and now Harry knew why he looked familiar; he was the gamekeeper and also keeper of the keys of Hogwarts. He'd started after the old gamekeeper had left and the former headmaster had resigned. He'd only seen him once, though, and doubted that he would recognize Harry. "This September he's going to be a teacher, too. He'll be doing Care of Magical Creatures."

Harry smiled at the obvious pride she felt in this particular brother. "Is he good with magical creatures?" Harry asked, watching her face.

"Oh, yes. He spent a few years in Romania studying dragons, but when the gamekeeper job came up at Hogwarts dad and mum wanted him to apply, so he'd be closer to home."

Suddenly she turned and met his eyes; he'd been gazing at her profile, and now he was caught out, but somehow he couldn't take his eyes away from hers.

"Your eyes are nice," she said softly.

Harry swallowed. "People say I have my mum's eyes," he croaked, his voice catching. They still looked at each other. Time seemed to have stopped. Harry never knew it was so nice to just sit and look at someone. He felt like he could look at her forever, count those freckles across her nose...

"Hey! Harry!"

Harry jumped, almost startled out of his skin. But it was his best friend, Draco Malfoy. He grinned and motioned him to come over.

"I finally found you! Dad's getting programs. Mum's gone to the loo...Oh, hello," he said brightly to Ginny, a broad smile splitting his thin, pale face. She smiled back uncertainly. Harry leapt fill the social void.

"Oh! This is my best friend, Draco Malfoy. Draco, this is, er--" but then he realized he didn't know her name. And he hadn't told her his, either, although she had probably heard Draco when he'd called out his name.

"Ginny Weasley," she said softly, smiling. But she wasn't smiling at Draco; it was directed at Harry. She seemed to be amused that he was trying to do formal introductions. "And you're Harry--" she prompted him. He stared at her like a dunce for a long moment.

"Oh! Potter. Harry Potter."

"Well," she laughed. "Hello, Potter-Harry-Potter." He flushed again, but couldn't resist smiling back at her. Then Draco's dad caught up with his son and stepped down to where they were sitting.

"Draco! Our seats are further along! Who are you talking to? Oh, hello Harry. Where are--"

But he was interrupted by Ginny's father yelling, "Hey!" and striding over to them. "What are you doing near my daughter, Malfoy?" Mr. Weasley demanded of Draco's father. Harry looked nervously from one man to the other. Ginny looked acutely embarrassed.

"Oh, is this one of yours?" His voice was dripping with disdain. "I had no idea. I was getting my son; he'd found his friend talking to her." Lucius Malfoy glared at Arthur Weasley.

Suddenly, the youngest brother was standing next to his father; he grasped his sister around the upper arm and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, Gin! What're you doing talking to them?"

She followed her brother, her brow creased, looking at Harry over her shoulder. Harry heard the word "Slytherin" as they moved away. He felt a stab of sadness in the middle of his chest as she was dragged further and further from him. Harry turned to look at Draco, who shrugged.

"It's just a girl. We're here for some serious Quidditch."

Draco would, of course, change his tune about girls in a few short years, but neither of them knew that yet. Harry remembered now that what would have been the next World Cup, in 1994, had been canceled because of the threats from dark wizards were taken more seriously this time. In his old life, that had been when he'd gone to see Ireland play Bulgaria...He sat and closed his eyes. Concentrate, he told himself. Remember. And as he sat, he began to see images in his mind, he began to be more of this world again...

There had been something of a cold war on ever since 1982. It was unclear who in the Ministry was supporting Voldemort and who was supporting Crouch, and there were periodic departmental purges to try to clear out people supporting the "wrong" side. For every atrocity committed by Death Eaters, there seemed to be another instance of wizarding rights being revoked by the very people who were supposed to be protecting the wizarding population from dark wizards. There were frequent inquisitions; those hauled in for questioning were usually sent to Azkaban. It wasn't clear whether all of those in the wizarding prison were really dark wizards or deserved to be there, but the Ministry seemed to operate under the assumption that it was better to be safe than sorry.

There were also a number of witches and wizards somewhere in the middle, who didn't support the Death Eaters but also didn't support the police state under which they were living by order of the Minister of Magic. This made *them* as suspect as any Death Eater. Aurors were both revered heroes and an endangered species; Neville Longbottoms's parents were

two of the most successful. Harry swallowed, considering the world he'd created. True, it wasn't completely overrun by Death Eaters and ruled by Voldemort; but was it a *just* world? Did all of those people in Azkaban deserve to be there? He was willing to bet that none of them had had advocates to speak for them in wizarding court. Kangaroo court is probably more like it, he thought. And yet, the Death Eaters were still committing atrocities and Voldemort was no closer to being vanquished...

Harry thought about this sad state of affairs. It wasn't completely dissimilar to the way things had been when he'd left the other life. Harry had the feeling he was seeing the future of the other timeline, if it had been allowed to continue. If he managed to return to that life, he had to warn people of what could happen, how the situation could degenerate.

"*If he managed to return.* That was a very big "if." Even if he found Hermione, what if she just thought he was barking mad? What if she still couldn't help him?

Stop that, he commanded himself. This is *Hermione*. Then he had a thought: He could get other help as well. There were other Muggle-born witches and wizards...Justin Finch-Fletchley, Dean Thomas, Alicia Spinnett...Once he found Hermione, she could help him find *them*.

As much as he'd been trying to remember more about this life, this world, now that it had come rushing back, he struggled to push the thoughts out of his mind and think of slightly pleasanter things. *He'd met Ginny when he was ten.* She hadn't been biased against him then, and she didn't seem to be now. Well, he thought, she was a very smart witch in his other life. If she's my friend in this life, maybe she could also help me fix the timelines. Or maybe when I find Hermione, she can help me explain to her what it means to be a witch.

Harry wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting in the Potions dungeon, but suddenly his mother came sweeping into the room, stopping short when she saw him. Harry was startled by the look of concern she wore on her face; *that* was how a mother was *supposed* to look, he thought. But it was quickly replaced by her imperious look.

"You've missed lunch," she said crisply. The first bell rang. "And class is about to start."

"I'm not hungry," he lied, and a moment later his stomach moved noisily inside him. She looked like she had heard. A thunderous noise overhead told him that the students were leaving the Great Hall for their afternoon classes. It was only a matter of minutes before the sixth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins entered the room, still chattering noisily. The second bell rang. Draco immediately strode over to Harry and took a place next to him.

"Where were you? Jamie was worried. You've been behaving queerly. Here--I threw a sandwich together for you." Under the table, he passed Harry a ham sandwich on thick, hand-sliced brown bread. His stomach moved within him again. He ducked down and took a large bite out of it, closing his eyes in relief as he chewed. But his relief was short-lived; he sat up and opened his eyes, the sandwich still in his right hand, under the desk. His mother was standing next to him looking very stern. She held out her hand and Harry reluctantly gave her the sandwich. He wished he'd had a chance to take another bite. He still had the first bite in his mouth, but he didn't dare chew while his mother was standing there. She took the sandwich and strode to the front of the room, dropping it unceremoniously in the dustbin.

"What," her voice rang out against the stone walls, "have you all been told about food in this room?" The assembled students stared at her, silent from fear, not ignorance. "The moment you bring food in that door you risk contaminating both your food *and* your work space. You apparently don't know enough to go to lunch at the appropriate time, Potter," she said snidely, "but you *should* know *that* much. Ten points from Slytherin."

Harry wished that a hole would open up at his feet so he could fall into it. The bite of bread and ham still sat in his mouth like a lump. Everyone was looking at him. He caught Ron Weasley's eye; Ron looked quite smug.

As soon as she turned to the blackboard and started writing the potions ingredients they would need, he was able to resume chewing, but when he swallowed, the food sank like a stone, and he felt as hungry as ever. His stomach continued to make noise all during class. Draco looked at him sympathetically. He's all right, Harry thought. Getting me the sandwich was nice. But I still don't want him touching Jamie.

The rest of the class was as successful for Harry as the first five minutes. Nothing he did pleased his mother. She praised Ron lavishly and awarded Gryffindor house points. Harry was baffled, because he was following all of the instructions very, very carefully, measuring to the finest grain of every ingredient, timing all of the additions with pinpoint precision, using the second hand on Draco's watch. At the end of the class, he felt mentally and emotionally drained from trying to please her and failing.

Harry plodded out of class feeling extraordinarily dispirited. Draco clapped his hand on his shoulder when they were in the corridor.

"You okay, Harry?"

He shrugged, not wanting to admit that she'd gotten to him. He followed Ron and Neville and Seamus with his eyes; the three of them had done well in class, and seemed to be very good friends. Ron had no beard, but he didn't appear to have a scar on his cheek, either. His prefect badge

glittered on his robes. He looked up and caught Harry's eye. Harry's stomach clenched when he saw the reflexive look of hatred on Ron's face.

"What are you looking at, Potter?"

Harry was startled. Suddenly, Draco stepped between the two of them.
"Nothing much, Weasley. What're *you* looking at?"

Ron looked around him to Harry. "I think I'm looking at someone who can't make a simple potion after five years..."

Harry lost it and pushed Draco aside. "I did everything *perfectly*. She just has it *in* for me. Not that it's any of *your* business."

He stood toe to toe with Ron now, his chin raised slightly so he could look in his eyes. It was slightly disorienting to see no flicker of friendship there, no recognition of shared hardships and adventures.

"Oh, but it *is* my business. I'm a prefect and what I'm hearing is a student accusing a teacher of gross unfairness. That's insubordination, *Slytherin*."

Harry clenched his jaw and glared back at him. Ron's blue eyes looked very hard. Harry was startled when he felt a hand on his arm. It was Draco.

"C'mon, Harry. We have Charms."

Harry gave Ron another good glare before following Draco up the stairs. Harry noticed that Neville and Seamus were also giving him looks of contempt. Neville not looking friendly; how odd, Harry thought.

They would be with the Gryffindors again, of course, for their Charms class, so there was no getting away from this. When they arrived, little Professor Flitwick was as cheerful as ever. Harry was encouraged by that.

"Welcome, welcome! Come in everyone!"

He was positively chirping. "Everyone take a seat and get out your quills and parchment. I will begin by telling you about various charms that are useful in dueling, and then we will do something new for all of you!" His eyes twinkled as he looked round at them all. "We will actually *duel!*" He clapped his hands together excitedly. Harry smirked and tried not to give an outright grin. Yes, remembered now. They had never dueled in the last five years, not in this life. But *he* had lived another life for fifteen years, and in *that* life, he was the captain of the Dueling Club. His heart beat quickly in anticipation, and he glanced at Ron Weasley.

He blindly wrote what Flitwick said about spells and counterspells and technique. He was only covering a small fraction of what Harry had

learned in his other life. Finally, when the class was about half over, he had them stand, and with a wave of his wand, he made the chairs fly to the walls, leaving the middle of the room clear. Harry sidled up to him while he was doing this and spoke to him softly.

"Professor--can we use any other spells during the dueling? I mean besides the ones you mentioned."

"Certainly, Harry. I'd be delighted to see what you might have up your sleeve."

Harry tried to suppress a smile. *Oh, I've got things up my sleeve, all right...*

They were paired up with Gryffindor against Slytherin, except for Millicent Bulstrode, who was dueling Professor Flitwick himself, since there were seven Slytherins and only six Gryffindors.

Harry found himself facing Parvati Patil, experiencing more than a little déjà vu. But he wasn't planning to use any particularly painful hexes or curses, as they'd done in Moody's class in his old life. Just some simple, painless spells...

"*Impedimenta!*" Harry cried as soon as Parvati had opened her mouth. He didn't even know what she was going to say; he simply stepped forward and plucked her wand from her grasp, then took the spell off her. She looked around, disoriented. Harry nodded at her.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked with a benign smile. She shook her head dumbly. Seamus was very nearly as easy; before he could say anything, Harry used the disarming charm. Before they had begun, Harry had noted that about ten feet directly behind Seamus was a pile of cushions used for summoning and banishing charms, so he would have a soft landing. Harry helped him stand up from his prone position on the cushions; Seamus had a baffled look on his face. Harry similarly disarmed Lavender. Padma managed to hit him with a tickling charm before he did the Reverso charm on her, and while she stared right at him, seeing only what was behind her, he plucked her wand right out of her hand (chuckling the whole time). After they took the spells off each other, he explained that he hadn't been laughing at her.

"I know," she said irritably. "I'm the one who put the tickling spell on you."

Facing Neville was like facing a stranger. Harry dodged a disarming charm and cried, "*Emagi rorrim!*" Neville blinked, looking down at his hands, and then Harry put the disarming charm on him and he went flying backward toward the cushions, his wand in Harry's hand. He went to help Neville

stand, but he irritably waved Harry off, looking furious. Harry was saddened by seeing this.

The next person he faced was Ron. Ron narrowed his eyes, looking at him with more sheer antagonism than Harry had seen on his face since the night of his sixteenth birthday, when he'd put the Cruciatus Curse on him. Harry swallowed. He's only beat me dueling once; I've beat him loads of times. Of course, all of that was in another life, but still...

"*Locomotor mortis!*" Ron began.

Harry almost laughed. He immediately countered with, "*Inverso!*" knowing how disoriented Ron would be. Sure enough, he screamed in surprise upon finding himself (he thought) suspended in the air upside down. Harry finished by saying, "*Accio!*" and catching Ron's wand handily, before taking the leg-locker spell off himself and the *Inverso* charm off Ron. Ron was glaring at him more intently than Neville had been. Harry sighed; he knew that this wasn't exactly a way to make friends with Ron, but all the same, it had felt *good*.

Finally, he was to duel Flitwick himself. I won't let him fool me this time, he thought. I'll bring out the big guns early; he won't be expecting that.

The little wizard pointed his wand and opened his mouth, but Harry was crying, "*Aegis!*" and in a split second, the invisible shield around him deflected the spell his professor was aiming at him. Flitwick frowned; *that* wasn't supposed to happen. Harry followed up with "*Petrificus totalus!*" The little wizard went stiff as a board and fell to the floor. Harry ended the shield charm and plucked Flitwick's wand from his stony grasp, then revived him. Oddly, when he sat up, he was even more cheerful than he'd been at the start of class.

"Excellent, Harry! Excellent, excellent!" Harry helped him to his feet and handed him his wand. The small man bowed deeply to Harry, and Harry, feeling self-conscious, returned the bow, although it was nowhere near as deep. Flitwick was very excited. "Now, how did all of you do? Each of you dueled seven times. I won six. Did anyone else win six?" Only Ron raised his hand. Flitwick smiled and nodded at him. "Five?" Draco and Neville raised their hands. Seamus had four while Zabini, Parvati and Padma had three. Nott and Millicent Bulstrode had only two wins, and Pansy, Morag and Lavender had one each. Flitwick turned to Harry now. "You didn't raise your hand, Harry."

He looked at his teacher levelly, trying not to look smug. "You didn't ask who'd won seven."

"Now, Harry, there were only seven--" He stopped and looked shrewdly at Harry, then addressed the rest of the class. "Did *no one* best Harry Potter in a duel?" Harry was a little irked; I beat you, he thought. But then,

Flitwick wasn't throwing the kinds of things at him he had during Harry's O.W.L.s in his other life. He'd expected it to be easy, and when it wasn't he probably thought it was an anomaly.

The room was very quiet as Flitwick scrutinized Harry. Finally, he cried, "Class dismissed!"

Most of the students started moving toward the door, but Padma was saying, "But Professor, it's not--"

"Are you arguing with an early dismissal?" Harry was surprised by his sharp tone. He could tell Padma was too.

"No, Professor."

"Well, then." He hustled out of the classroom. Once they were in the corridor, Harry saw him go off in the direction of Dumbledore's office--wait, he corrected his thoughts. That would be McGonagall's office now. Or not. He could be going somewhere else...

Harry turned away and found himself faced with a wall of Gryffindors. Ron, Neville and Seamus stood across Harry's path, blocking him from going anywhere. "What was that?" Ron demanded. Harry recalled their earlier run-in. How was he ever going to make friends with Ron if he kept being so confrontational?

"That," Draco said smugly, slapping Harry's back, "was my best friend wiping the floor with you, Weasley, *that's what that was.*"

Harry grimaced; Draco meant well, but he was *not* helping. Harry looked at Ron and shrugged. "I know a few things about dueling. That's all."

Ron drew his mouth into a line. "You got lucky. *That's all.*" He and the other Gryffindors turned and walked away from the Slytherins in a crowd, although Parvati, oddly enough, looked over her shoulder at Harry as she walked away. Harry swallowed.

"Come on," he said hoarsely to Draco. "What does Jamie have right now?"

"Transfiguration," Draco said without hesitation.

"Go wait outside her class for her. Then both of you come down to the Great Hall."

Draco frowned. "But it won't be time to eat for another hour and a half after class is over."

"Good. I don't want to be disturbed. Let me borrow your watch."

"Again? Guess I know what I should have given you for your birthday." But Draco handed him the watch and set off in the opposite direction to meet Jamie outside Sirius Black's classroom.

The other Slytherins were having an animated discussion about the dueling. Harry walked with them, not participating, and he waiting for them to go down the steps leading to the dungeons from the entrance hall before he went into the Great Hall. He strode across to the anteroom where Professor McGonagall had conducted his Animagus training in his other life. *I don't care about applications*, he thought. *I don't have sixteen months*. Once in the room, he put a locking charm on the door and lit a fire in the fireplace for both light and warmth. He flexed his arms and closed his eyes, trying to bring on the change, thinking about becoming the golden griffin...

But instead, excruciating pain ripped through his body, sending him sprawling onto the floor. It was the first magical thing he'd failed to do that he'd been able to do in his old life. But this involved a body he hadn't had before; *this* body wasn't accustomed to the transfiguration. And, he remembered, this body wasn't used to the morning run, either. He was able to alter his hair, but that was something he'd done without thought in his old life. The Animagus transfiguration was another story. Harry sighed. I'm going to have to start from scratch with both the running *and* this...

So he did. He began again with making his fingernails grow and shrink, grow and shrink...He lost track of how many repetitions he'd executed when he noticed the time and realized that Jamie and Draco should be arriving any minute. He removed the locking charm from the door and stepped out into the Great Hall once more, just as his sister and best friend were entering. He motioned to them to come to the room where he'd been. Once the three of them were inside, he locked the door again and turned to face them. I'll need their help, he realized, but they can never know why I'm doing this...

"I need your help," he said, his words echoing his thoughts. They looked at each other, then at him. "I need to be able to get out of Hogwarts sometimes and into a Muggle town. You're going to have to cover for me. I need to be able to go someplace where they have Muggle phone books or something similar; maybe a university, or a library. I need to find someone who's living in the Muggle world."

Jamie frowned. "Why?"

Harry drew his lips into a line. "I can't tell you that."

Draco looked dissatisfied with this answer. "Well, *who* are you looking for, then?"

Harry looked at them levelly. "A Muggle-born witch."

They stared at him. The silence stretched on. Then suddenly Draco burst into laughter, and after a confused moment, Jamie joined him, also thinking it was some big joke.

"Yeah, right!" Draco said, trying to get his breath. "A Muggle-born witch!" He leaned on Jamie, covering his face with his hand. Jamie looked like she didn't mind a bit, and she continued laughing as well.

"Shut up!" Harry screamed at them. They straightened up and stared at him.

"You're not serious," Jamie said softly, swallowing.

"I've never been more serious. And I'm also going to be an illegal Animagus, so you'll have to cover for me on that, too."

More silence. They looked at each other again. Harry thought they seemed far more likely to recommend that he check into St. Mungo's than support him in these illegal activities.

"Well? Can I count on you or do I have to look up memory charms so you won't turn me in?"

Jamie drew her mouth into a line. "We'd never turn you in Harry, you know that. But all this you're proposing...leaving the school grounds without permission, looking for a Muggle-born witch, trying to become an Animagus...I mean *Harry*. It's the first day of term. Are you trying to see how many wizarding laws or school rules you can break in one day?"

Harry frowned at them. This he was not expecting. "Oh, for crying out loud! Are we Slytherins or not? Jamie, do you have *any idea* how many rules our mother and father broke on a regular basis? And *they* were in Gryffindor and were Head Boy and Girl. Sirius and Remus were involved too. And *then* there was our stepfather. Did you know he and mum were dating each other before she dated our father? And they were sneaking around the castle together in the middle of the night, too."

Jamie's jaw had dropped even further than when Harry had been proposing the rule-breaking extravaganza. "*Mum?*" was all she could say. Harry was glad she didn't ask how he knew so he didn't have to engage in another round of I-Can't-Tell-You.

"That's right. So I ask you two again: Are we Slytherins or aren't we?"

Jamie and Draco looked at each other once more, then back at Harry. "We're in," Draco said, and Jamie nodded. "But," his best friend said, "there better be something in all this that involves getting Weasley back, but good. Not that I didn't enjoy seeing you whip him in Charms

class...And *when* did you get so good at dueling, anyway? You know Flitwick used to be a champion, don't you?"

Harry nodded. "He was caught off guard. He didn't think he had to worry about me. Any time you think that, you're liable to lose a duel. Remember that. And no, this has nothing to do with Weasley. This is much more important than juvenile grudges."

They looked perplexed again as to why he was being so serious.

"Then tell us what's really going on," Draco said. "I mean, *what's* more important? You've conveniently left that part out."

Harry floundered a bit. "Do--do you really *like* the wizarding world the way it is now? The purges and the so-called trials and the Death Eater violence and no Muggle-borns at Hogwarts? Is this how it should be?"

They both grimaced and shrugged. "It always has been," Draco said; Harry knew he didn't think about politics much.

"No," Harry said, "it hasn't."

"And I suppose you're going to 'fix' it all on your own," his sister said skeptically.

Harry thought for a moment; yes, let her think that. Far better than the truth. "In a manner of speaking, yes. But not really on my own; that's why I need your help. And the help of this Muggle-born witch. Actually, two witches. And two Muggle-born wizards."

"Four?" Draco sputtered. "You didn't say that. Whatever for? What will that accomplish? And how do you expect to find *any* Muggle-born witches and wizards?"

"Not just any Muggle-borns; specific ones. I already know their names. So it's just a matter of getting to a Muggle town..."

"*How* do you know their names?" Jamie demanded. She was sounding more and more frustrated with him. Harry swallowed before giving her the now-familiar answer.

"I can't tell you." They frowned at him and he looked back at them, grimacing. He was asking a lot of them; blind faith, really, with precious few details. Maybe I can explain this a little better, he thought, wracking his brain. He tried to figure out how to frame his argument so he didn't have to say anything about trying to fix the timeline.

"One reason why things have gone so wrong in the wizarding world is that people who are obsessed with bloodlines don't have enough people to

counter them. No Muggle-born witches and wizards coming into the magical community means that the pureblood-obsessed are gaining strength with every year."

"You mean like my dad." Draco's voice was very quiet.

Harry hesitated. "Well, er--"

Now his best friend laughed. "Harry, what's the matter with you? You know I bloody hate my dad. Stupid pain in the--"

"Anyway--" Harry pushed on, relieved that Draco wasn't the pureblood fanatic here he was in the other time; "the magical world needs *new* blood, not purer blood. The Muggle-born witches and wizards need to know who they are, and what they can do. If Voldemort is ever going to fall..."

"Aaah!" Jamie and Draco cried together. Draco looked very, very annoyed. "Don't say that name!" There were times he *really* reminded Harry of Ron.

He frowned at them. "I bloody well will! No egotistical megalomaniac is going to control the way I speak and think! He killed my father, and I *will* name him!"

Draco swallowed. "I never knew you were so set against being a Death Eater. The very thought--well, let's just say it's featured prominently in *my* nightmares for years. But I knew your dad was one, like my dad, so I just thought...You could have *said* something, Harry. I thought I was the only Slytherin who felt this way. You think the Sorting Hat made a mistake with us?"

Harry hesitated; he remembered how promptly the hat had declared Draco a Slytherin. Should he tell them that the hat had given *him* a choice? He decided against it. "The hat doesn't make mistakes. Mad Eye Moody was a Slytherin, you know. Amazing Auror. Sometimes it takes a Slytherin to catch a Slytherin."

Now his friend laughed. "Oh, right. You're going to catch the Dark Lord. That's rich."

"We have to do this. You don't want to be a Death Eater. And neither do I. I'd rather do just about anything else in the *world*."

Draco swallowed. His voice had become very quiet. "But what choice will I have? What choice will *you* have?"

Harry looked at his grey eyes, remembering the boy in the ring at Dover on Christmas night, the agony he went through...It was odd; when Voldemort had no power to speak of, Lucius Malfoy was raising Draco to

be a good Death Eater, even though it was unlikely he would become one, and Draco had eaten it up. But as soon as Voldemort returned to power and Draco found himself in that ring of wizards, it immediately lost its appeal. It became all too real. Perhaps that was why the Draco in this life had already decided he didn't want that; it had been real for his whole life. Voldemort had never lost power. It was always something in his future that he was dreading, and now it was drawing very, very near.

"I'm choosing to do this," Harry said to him quietly. "To fight. And if we don't manage to get out of being initiated, then we'll just be spies and let him *think* we're loyal to him. But I'm never *really* going to serve that--that--personification of evil." He refrained from telling him that his stepfather had been working as a spy for years; what Draco didn't know couldn't be pulled out of him by Veritaserum. Harry almost wished *he* didn't know; but he was also glad he did, glad that he knew that Severus Snape was a good man who was doing a just and dangerous job.

He wished that he could tell his sister that their dad wasn't half bad either, but stopped himself. Perhaps she simply thought he had had no choice in becoming a Death Eater and forgave him because he was a good dad to them. Harry nodded at her. "Listen--there are some things our father had when he was a student that we could really use. That's one of the first things I'm going to need help with."

Jamie frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He had an Invisibility Cloak. Try to find out from Mum what happened to it. I'll try Sirius. Or maybe Remus will know. I'll have to write to him. And there's something else...but maybe I should do that one myself..."

"What's wrong with me?" Draco sounded hurt. "Am I Mr. Useless now?"

"No, you're Mr. Money. You know our mum and dad are tightwads. Well, mum, really. You get a good allowance. You need to start setting aside some of it so we can get it changed into Muggle money. When I go into the Muggle world, I'll need something other than Galleons and Sickles. I'm going to work on getting the other item that used to be our father's; I thought I might use a summoning charm to try to find it. It's a parchment that looks blank, but it's really an enchanted map of Hogwarts. It's a plan, really, of all of the floors in the castle and it shows the grounds too, but not the forest. It has secret passages marked on it--although I know where all of them are, so I don't need the map for that. The really great thing about it is that it shows the names of people who are moving about the castle and grounds. It's amazing; it was created by our father and Sirius and Remus and--" he licked his lips and dropped his voice, "--Peter Pettigrew."

"Pettigrew!" Jamie spat the name.

"Never mind him. He probably didn't do much important in creating it. But it would be very, very useful to have it...For years it was in the caretaker's office. It may still be there. We need to work out a plan for one of us to get hauled in there, someone else to create a diversion so I can try to find out whether it's still in there..."

Jamie looked confused. "Harry! What are you talking about? If you knew it was in there the last five years, why didn't you get it before now?"

Harry clamped his mouth shut. "I--I can't tell you. And like I said, it used to be there and I don't know whether it still is. Someone else may have gotten to it first." Had the Fred and George in this life also found the map in the caretaker's office? Had some other student? Harry had no way of knowing. There were so many uncertainties...

Draco threw up his hands. "We're back to that. *I can't tell you.* Fine. *Don't tell us.* What, do you think you're a spy already? Give it a rest for now, Harry. We don't have to worry about being Death Eaters yet." He checked his watch on Harry's wrist. "It's almost time to eat. Listening to crazy, revolutionary plans has given me an appetite." He smiled at his friend.

Harry smiled back. Complete trust and loyalty were going to be necessary for this, he thought, and I'm damn lucky that my sister and best friend are willing to give me that. He suddenly missed Hermione and Ron with a great pang, but looking at the two of them, he realized that he had the next best thing at the moment. As they went back out into the Great Hall, he looked wistfully at his sister for a minute. *If I do manage to fix the timelines, she won't exist any more.* He drew in his breath; how can I ask her to unknowingly contribute to her own non-existence? No, he said to himself sternly. She should never have existed to begin with. This whole world is wrong. I just have to keep them convinced that all of these plans have the goal of preventing me and Draco from becoming Death Eaters. They can't know the truth.

Harry sat down between the two of them at the Slytherin table; a few students had started trickling in, and soon they weren't the least bit conspicuous as more and more students and finally teachers made their way down to the hall for the evening meal. Harry turned his head to look at his sister's profile again. *I'll just have to appreciate her while I can. At least I've had this opportunity.*

She turned and smiled at him, her green eyes glittering, her features so like their mother's. *But, he thought, I'm still not letting Draco touch her.*

* * * * *

They went back down to the dungeons when they were done eating. Harry felt mentally and emotionally exhausted. He didn't know when he'd had a more tiring twenty-four hours. Then he remembered that he'd also been

up early running, and he said good night to Draco and Jamie and stumbled blindly to his dorm to go to bed. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

When he woke hours later, the dorm was filled with the sounds of snoring. Harry couldn't differentiate between Draco's, Zabini's or Nott's noises, but between the three of them he was having a hard time getting back to sleep. Finally, he decided to make good use of being awake and he climbed out of bed, slipping on his shoes with no socks and throwing on his dressing gown without tying the belt. He slipped his wand into his pocket.

Once in the common room, he paused; the plan he'd come up with was for one of them to get caught prowling around and hauled to the caretaker's office, then another one of them creating a diversion that allowed the first person to search the office (or use a summoning charm). Draco had sounded fast asleep, so he decided to see whether Jamie might be awake. He entered the corridor where he'd been before and checked each door, passing the *First Years*, then the *Seventh Years*, then the *Fifth Years*. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason. He grimaced; the *Fourth Years* were probably dead last...

Then he heard a door open behind him; he whirled; it was the Fifth Year door, and the person who'd opened it was none other than Mariah Kirkner. *Oh great, Harry thought. Just what I need right now.*

Mariah looked sleepy and started to cross to the lavatory, but she noticed Harry and perked right up. She walked toward him, smiling, and Harry braced himself. *Don't look at her, he commanded himself. Ignore the fact that her night-dress is very, very thin...*

"Harry!" she whispered. "What are ye doin' here? Ye wouldn't be lookin' fer me by any chance?" she lilted at him, looking rather hopeful, standing far too close for comfort. She put her hand on his arm and drew even closer. His heart thudded painfully.

"I, um--I wanted to talk to my sister--"

"I see," she said, sounding unconvinced. "Maybe ye can talk ter me instaid. I'm a *good* listener." Closer still. Harry could smell her minty toothpaste. He was shaking. This is not good, he thought. He felt slightly out of control. *Hermione*, he reminded himself. *Hermione Hermione Hermione*. Whom I haven't touched in how long...?

He shook himself. Get a grip, Potter, he ordered himself. Mariah was smiling at him very, very suggestively. He swallowed and tried a different gambit.

"Uh, listen, Mariah. Not that I'm not flattered and everything, but I thought--well I thought that you and Draco were kind of, er, *involved*, and I wouldn't want to--"

She laughed. "We have an understandin', me and Draco. We're not aixclusive. And anyway; this was kind of his idear..."

He furrowed his brow. "What?" He forgot to keep his voice low.

"Wail, not this specific time an' place, but he was writin' to me this summer about yer--virginity problem."

"My what?" He was in danger of waking up every girl in the Slytherin dorms.

She shrugged. "What are friends for? You've got a good one. And I have to say; the idear *is* quite appealin'..."

"But--but--" he was trying to find some plausible explanation for why he wouldn't want what practically every teenage boy wanted; "I don't really want a girlfriend right now--"

"I dinna say I was goin' ter be yer girlfriend, Harry. We're jest talkin' about shaggin'." He tried not to choke upon hearing her say this. Just when I thought I had Draco figured out, he does *this*. "And anyway," she continued, "what about that 'mystery woman'?"

He frowned. " 'Mystery woman?'"

She smirked. "Thought so. Ye made 'er up. I tol' Draco she wasn't real. Oh, wail, ye look a bit shocked an' all. Think about it. Ye don't have ter decide right now. Just so's ye know the opportunity is here..." She smiled coyly, then retreated into the fifth-year dorm again. Harry lost his enthusiasm for his original mission and returned to his room, his mind whirling while he lay in bed, listening to the Snoring Trio. So; he'd made up a girlfriend to get Draco off his back. But it hadn't worked. He sighed and rolled over. Maybe he could convince his best friend that the work ahead of them would make other kinds of social activities impractical...

He just hoped he stayed strong and didn't give in. He saw Mariah standing in the corridor again, the torches on the wall showing just how thin her night dress was. With another shudder, he rolled over again and punched his pillow, then placed his arm over his exposed ear to try to muffle the snores, trying to will himself back to sleep...

* * * * *

The next day was uneventful. He went to Herbology with the Ravenclaws, to History of Magic with the Hufflepuffs (living Binns was even more

boring than dead Binns) and Ancient Runes, taught by Professor Wimble, of the horns. Harry was actually interested in this class; he remembered the book Sirius had given him about spells one could do with snakes; there were some runes in there he'd been unable to read, and some of the material they were covering in class seemed to address things that might help him understand that book better, if he ever got back to that life...

When, he said sternly to himself. When I return.

The last period of the day was a free one for all sixth years, regardless of house, and Harry and Draco relaxed by flying around the Quidditch pitch. It was early for team practice to begin, but Harry knew he should start thinking seriously about honing his Keeper skills. I'm not the Seeker any more, he thought. He watched enviously as Draco raced after a Snitch. He remembered how hard it had been *not* to pursue it during the one match in his fifth year (in his other life) when Ginny had played Seeker. He turned away, trying not to think about it too much.

The next day when he was eating breakfast, he received a note when the post-owls came flying into the Great Hall. His legs weren't aching as badly as they had the day before; he was getting acclimated to the running again (and he was remembering to take his rucksack with him now, so he wouldn't have to summon his school supplies every morning). The note read:

Stand me up will you? That's two days in a row. Be behind greenhouse #3 today after the last class if you know what's good for you.

The note was written in block letters and was not signed. Harry swallowed. He'd made an appointment to meet someone--probably before September 1--and he'd utterly forgotten. There were *so many* things to remember, and still the one brain to hold it all. He glanced at the note again. Did it look like Ron's hand? he wondered. It didn't sound particularly friendly. He thought of how Draco had responded to Ron outside the Charms classroom. If this was going to be a confrontation, he'd rather do it on his own. Maybe there was a chance he could get Ron to bury the hatchet; maybe they could be friends after all. Harry was hopeful. He folded the parchment before Draco could spy it. It'll be fine. Even if he comes with Neville and Seamus and the attack me, I can take the three of them. He felt confident. It'll be fine.

After Transfiguration with the Ravenclaws, he spent his free period by himself in the anteroom off the Great Hall, practicing for his Animagus Transfiguration. Draco wasn't interested in coming; he'd been ogling Mandy Brocklehurst all through class and he struck up a conversation with her right afterwards, then walked her to History of Magic.

Harry was progressing in his training much more quickly in this life than he had in his other life. Whereas the first time, he'd spent a week on his fingernails, he'd spent only two days doing that, and now he had moved on to altering his actual fingers and toes. Of course, it helped that he already knew he could do this. It was like producing the Patronus; once he knew he could, there was no problem. He remembered what Dumbledore had said about him being highly suggestible. Now all I have to do is suggest very strongly to myself that I can fix the timelines...

After lunch there was Potions again, and Harry withstood his mother's disdain and approbation with an air of resignation that he could tell she was finding progressively vexing. After that he had Care of Magical Creatures; he followed Draco to a second-floor classroom, confused at first, but then realizing that it wasn't a given that Charlie would teach down at Hagrid's old hut; he lived in the castle, after all, in the staff wing.

Harry was cheered by the fact that everyone who entered the room said, "Hello, Charlie," and Charlie nodded back at them all with a smile. Does McGonagall know that he lets us use his first name? he wondered. Today it was a lecture; they were to take notes on magical birds, specifically the phoenix, augurey, fwooper, and diricrawl (which Muggles called the dodo). Charlie wore faded jeans and a denim shirt under wrinkled brown robes that were open in the front; he tended to sit on his desk while speaking about the various birds, and made quite a lot of jokes about Uric the Oddball and his encounters with some of the birds they were discussing. Harry found himself laughing quite often; this class was the most fun he'd ever had in school! And Charlie was the most down-to-earth teacher he'd ever seen. He felt a twinge of guilt for a moment, as though he were being disloyal to Hagrid, but he pushed that thought down and tried to just enjoy the moment.

After class, Charlie beckoned to Harry and Draco, wringing their hands and grinning. "So! How are my two best students?" He looked at the doorway to the room. "Are the rest of them gone? Can't have the others hear me saying that!" he grinned, then winked at them. So, Harry thought, we're friends with Charlie! He wracked his brain and came up with an image of the three of them--sometimes joined by Jamie--sitting in Charlie's office having tea and laughing uproariously, playing Exploding Snap...

Harry grinned back at him; this was encouraging. Ron's not my friend--not yet--but Charlie is. Maybe that will help grease the wheels of friendship with Ron.

Ron.

He'd almost forgotten about the note, about the meeting down at greenhouse #3. Charlie had just suggested that the three of them go to his office to catch up, but Harry hit his head with the heel of his hand.

"Oh, I almost forgot! I have to go, er, meet someone." Draco hesitated. "No!" Harry said to him. "You go. I'll probably be along shortly. Or--if not, I'll see you at dinner. Sorry! Great class, Charlie!" he called over his shoulder as he raced away from them.

He was starting to get winded as he neared the greenhouses and slowed down; can't be out of breath if they ambush me, he thought. I have to be alert. But mostly, he hoped he could talk some sense into Ron, end the feud that had clearly been brewing for years. He missed his old best friend.

He crept behind greenhouse #3. Everything was very quiet. He put his rucksack down on the ground. There wasn't a soul in sight. Good, Harry thought. I'm not late. He turned to the greenhouse, looking in, making a smug face at a giant Venus flytrap that looked like it wanted to have him for dinner. *Can't get me*, he thought at it irrationally.

Suddenly, he felt someone come up behind him; there were hands over his glasses.

"Guess who?"

The hands and voice belonged to a girl, he could tell. *Oh*, he thought. This hadn't occurred to him. The hands were very pale; he could feel her chest pressed against his back, and tried not to let this affect him. *I am in complete control*, he told himself, not really convinced.

"Listen," he started to say, turning around, "I thought I told you before, Mariah, you're nice and all, but I'm not interested--"

"Mariah? What's this about Mariah?"

Harry stopped dead. He was staring into the face of Ginny Weasley. She slid her arms up around his neck. "Is that why you've been standing me up for two days? Decided to get a different girlfriend?" But now she was smiling at him; she seemed to know that Mariah was no competition. Harry was shocked. *Different girlfriend?* Was Ginny his *girlfriend*?

And then she took advantage of his mouth hanging wide open in shock, and pulled his face down to hers.

Chapter Six

Slouching Toward London

Ginny's body was pressed against his, her arms twined around his neck. And her mouth--her mouth was a revelation, a mighty suction against his,

drawing out his very soul, it seemed, as if she was a dementor. But a dementor was never this warm, this soft, with a taste like chocolate...

Harry pulled back, dazed. He stared at Ginny feeling more confused than ever before in his life (both of them). He felt intoxicated, dizzy with want and yet frightened to acknowledge that want. She was suddenly quite terrifying to him. Ginny looked at him, frowning with concern.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

He nodded dumbly, trying to remember how this had happened, trying to recall when the next time was that he'd seen her after the 1990 World Cup...

It was the following year. He was in Diagon Alley with his sister and Draco and his mum, and they were shopping for his school supplies. After the three of them were finished their ice creams, Harry's mum and Draco's dad collected them to go to Madam Malkin's. They stood still as statues while they were measured, then waited impatiently for their new robes to be hemmed. After that they moved on the Flourish & Blotts for their books.

Harry loved the bookshop; it seemed to have every book a wizard could ever need. He would finally have spell books of his very own. He wandered down a long aisle full of potions texts; he recognized many titles his parents had at home. Jamie grew bored and staggered into the next aisle. Harry heard two bodies make contact and then he heard Jamie's familiar voice saying, "Oh, sorry. I'm so stupid. Didn't see you down there."

"That's all right. I'm just waiting for my mum to finish with my brothers. Four of them will be at Hogwarts this September, and that's a lot of books to buy."

Harry was startled. That voice--it was familiar. He stooped and took some potions tomes off a lower shelf; through the resulting gap he could see unruly red hair. His sister sat down next to the girl on the floor.

"Do you mind if I join you? My brother and his best friend are starting at Hogwarts too, and we've been shopping all morning. I'm sick of it. I know I should be happy for them, but I'm going to really miss them. It's just so unfair I have to wait two more years..."

The red-haired girl sighed noisily. "I know what you mean. I have to wait another year. My brother Ron will be a first year, so I'll be all alone at home with my mum and dad this year."

"All alone at home? I knew I didn't see you at the Hogsmeade school. Don't you go to school then?"

"Mum was a teacher. She does our lessons at home. I should say I'll be home alone with mum, since my dad's almost never around. He used to run just one department at the Ministry--the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. But the labor shortage hit the Ministry a few years ago and now he's running the Transportation office too, which makes sense, I suppose. I mean, most Portkeys are also Muggle artifacts, and you have to be really careful they don't fall into Muggle hands. He's making twice as much money now and all, but he's never home..."

"Hmm. I wish I was going to be home alone. I'll still have to put up with my little brothers. They're impossible. Every time I talk to one of them, whoever it is insists I've got the name wrong. I'm convinced they just do that to be annoying. I mean, I must be getting it right sometimes. Just be glad you don't live with twins..."

"Oh, but I do!" the other girl practically squealed. "Ron's a first year, but Fred and George will be in third year! They do the same things!" She seemed delighted to find someone who was also suffering the slings and arrows of having twins for brothers. "I mean--they think they're so original, as if every set of twins ever born hasn't pulled exactly the same stuff..."

"Too right!" Jamie agreed, laughing.

Harry replaced the books on the shelf just as his mother came up behind him.

"Harry! Whatever are you doing? I've got all of the books from your list. Find Jamie. we're going to Ollivander's."

Harry nodded. He swallowed, took a deep breath and walked around the bookcase, trying to seem nonchalant.

"C'mon, Jamie. It's time to go." His voice shook a little and he wished it weren't so high still; he sounded so young.

"Oh, hello!" the red-haired girl said brightly. "You must be the brother who's starting at Hogwarts." She turned to Jamie. "And your name's Jamie? I like that. Very original."

Jamie was the one who looked uncomfortable now. She stood awkwardly, brushing down her robes. "Actually, I was named after my father," she mumbled. "'Scuse me..." She pushed past Harry, who was suddenly faced with explaining his sister's odd behavior to the girl sitting on the floor.

"Um, she was born after our father died. About four months after."

She rose, wincing. "Oh, sorry. I really put my foot in it, didn't I? Er, sorry about your dad..."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. Jamie'll be fine."

"Do I know you?" She suddenly seemed to forget Jamie; she was staring intently at his face.

"Uh, no, I don't think so." Harry didn't feel like bringing up the World Cup, considering the way Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Weasley and Ron had spoiled that meeting.

She looked at him with her brow furrowed. "Oh. Oh well. I thought--nevermind. Anyway, good luck at Hogwarts."

He smiled awkwardly. "Thanks."

Then her eyes opened wide. "Wait! Your eyes--I remember now--"

"Harry!"

Jamie had returned and was now dragging on his arm. "Come on! Mum's waiting outside. Do you want a wand or not?"

He waved a feeble goodbye to her as his little sister dragged him through the bookshop. Oh, that's dignified, he thought...

"Harry? Are you all right?" she asked again. He gazed at her in disbelief.

"I'm--I'm fine. Have--have you been eating chocolate?"

"Have I--oh yes! I almost forgot. Zoey's trying to lose weight so she gave me one of her Chocolate Frogs. Is that allowed?" She smiled mischievously.

"It's wonderful," he said breathlessly, unable to stop himself. Before he knew it, she was kissing him again, and he was remembering more...

He'd spotted Ginny the moment Professor Vector let the first years in the Great Hall. She looked as nervous as the rest of them. Harry didn't really pay attention when the other students were being sorted; he was waiting for her. She came at the end--the wait seemed forever to Harry. And then it was over in a split second; the hat was no sooner on her head than it was crying out, "Gryffindor!" prompting her frighteningly enthusiastic twin brothers to go completely mad (again).

Harry didn't behave quite rationally after that. He found out the first year Gryffindor schedule and ran all over the castle, positioning himself at opportune points to just glimpse her as she moved between classes. Draco thought he was daft, and said so. (Harry refused to tell him the reason for all the dashing about; it was rather embarrassing.)

Then she was made the youngest Quidditch player in almost a century (Charlie Weasley convinced Sirius Black to put her on the Gryffindor team as they hadn't had a decent Seeker in two years). Harry would sneak down to the Quidditch pitch to watch her practice. Oliver Wood released the Snitch and she caught it; he released it, she caught it, over and over. Harry had heard about her brother Charlie, who was legendary, but he'd never seen anyone who played Seeker like her.

Draco was made Seeker on the Slytherin team that year, the culmination of years of training. Harry commiserated with his best friend when Ginny beat him to the Snitch, but secretly he was proud of her. Then he was made reserve Keeper in his third year (his dad had told Flint it would be a good idea). Flint was sick for the last match of the year, against Gryffindor, and Harry had to play. Ron Weasley was playing Chaser for Gryffindor, along with two girls in fourth and fifth year. For quite some time, Harry caught every Quaffle Ron sent his way. Ron was looking fiercer and fiercer as the game continued, and even though the Slytherin Chasers were scoring on Gryffindor only about fifty percent of the time, the Gryffindors hadn't scored on Harry at all.

The match continued for over four hours. Harry had never seen one go so long, and he had to play in this one. Ginny was looking exhausted; Harry felt like his fingers had been welded to his broom handle. Gryffindor had finally started to score on Harry after three hours, but their success rate was only about one in four. Everyone was flagging. Slytherin was up, four-hundred twenty to two-hundred. Draco had seen the Snitch many, many times, but each time, either Ginny had flown interference, getting in his way until it vanished again, or her

brothers had hit Bludgers his way. Draco was lucky to still be alive, Harry thought.

Finally, Ginny couldn't take it any more; she spied the Snitch and, instead of trying to draw Draco off, she flew to it herself and plucked it out of the air, then landed in a heap on the grass, her girlfriends rushing to her while the disappointed Gryffindor boy who did the match commentary intoned dismally, "And Ginny Weasley has the Snitch. Slytherin wins the match, four-hundred twenty to three-hundred fifty. Oh, and Slytherin also wins the Quidditch Cup..." he added listlessly. It was the most subdued Harry had ever heard him.

Harry flew down to the ground, then collapsed; it was as though he'd forgotten how to use his legs. As he'd been substituting for Flint, Draco (also rather shaky) helped him to stand so he could shake hands with Wood, who looked like he'd been through a war.

The seventh-year grasped his hand rather hard. "You're a good Keeper, Potter," he said without any irony. "If I didn't know that Flint really wanted to beat me himself, I'd say he was faking being sick just so you could play."

Harry nodded briefly; he was too knackered for an extended exchange of pleasantries. "Thanks. It was a good match."

The other Slytherins (those not on the team) lifted Harry and Draco to their shoulders, carrying them from the pitch (otherwise they probably would have lain on the grass all night). Harry saw that various Gryffindors who hadn't played were helping the members of the team hobble back to the castle, but there was no triumphant shoulder-carrying. They hadn't won the Quidditch Cup, in spite of having Ginny for their Seeker...

Harry had continued to follow Ginny around the castle during his fourth year, and then his fifth. Finally, near the end of term, in May, he rounded a corner, on his way to the library, when he ran headlong into her. He dropped his rucksack and everything came cascading out of it; she had been carrying books in her arms, which she also promptly dropped. Down on the floor they bumped heads while trying to pick up their belongings; they grinned at each other with embarrassment. Then Harry saw her two best friends, Zoey and Annika, peeking out from behind a suit of armor, urging her to do something with wild hand gestures and bizarre facial expressions. Annika mouthed the words, Get it over with! Or so he thought. He looked at Ginny, perplexed, just as she

grasped his face and pulled his mouth to hers. He was taken unawares; he wanted to hold her, kiss her properly, but he felt paralyzed by shock. After a few seconds, she pulled back, quickly scooped up her books and went running down the corridor, her friends joining her. Their laughter echoed off the stone walls, and Harry could hear their words quite clearly, amplified by the excellent Hogwarts acoustics.

"There! I finally did it! Now are you happy?"

"Ooh! Next time you lose a bet, I'll have to make you do something even worse, like proclaim your love to him..."

"Zoey! How could you? I thought I was your friend..."

He sat in the messy pile of books and parchment and ink bottles, feeling his heart break into a million pieces...

The next day he was looking through the potions section of the library when he heard the girls talking again. They were sitting on the other side of the bookcase where he was searching.

"All right. What can I make you do next?" Harry heard Zoey Russell's mischievous voice.

"Argh," was Ginny's answer. "Isn't it enough you made me kiss my own stalker? Take it easy on me. Now he probably thinks I really like him or something." Harry's heart felt trod on by a herd of hippogriffs. She knew; she knew he'd been following her around for four years, and it was a great joke to her and her friends. Of course, he thought, how could she not know? She would have to be blind...

He staggered around the bookcase and stood before them. They were immediately silent. He saw that Ginny was beet red.

"No," he told her, his voice thick with tears. "I don't think there's any way I could possibly get that impression. 'Scuse me..." he mumbled, walking away blindly, going out into the corridor. He'd taken in the look of horror on Ginny's face when she'd seen him, but he didn't want to think about her face now. Right, he thought. How to get over someone. Have them treat you like you're less than scum. Very good. Very effective.

He had gone into a stairwell with a stone spiral staircase leading down to--he wasn't sure where. He was just walking

aimlessly, hoping to get himself lost. He heard pounding feet behind him.

"Harry!"

He turned at the sound of her voice, unable to stop himself. He was crying in earnest now, tears streaking his face, which he made no effort to wipe. She pattered down the stone stairs to him. He'd collapsed on one of the wedge-shaped steps, leaning against the curving outer wall. She sat down next to him.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. You weren't meant to hear that." He turned away from her, unable to prevent additional tears from escaping from his eyes. "Oh, that didn't sound right. What I mean is--"

"What you mean is you thought it would be funny to play with the feelings of someone who's worshipped the ground you walk on since he met you when you were nine and then ground his heart into the dust. I get it. You want to be rid of me. Fine. You'll find that I'll no longer be following you about. Congratulations. It worked." He rose and continued to walk down the stairs.

"No, Harry! That's not--"

He didn't want to listen to her. He'd thought she was different. But she had feet of clay just like everyone else. She wasn't the perfect paragon of virtue he'd had living in his mind; she was a living, breathing teenage girl, as thoughtless and cruel as they came. He was done obsessing over her for good (he tried to tell himself).

But what would he do with his time now? he wondered. He'd devoted a great deal of mental energy to knowing where she would be at any time of the day. He'd prided himself on guessing correctly what she would do at the times when it wasn't so certain. His years playing the fox meant he knew how someone being pursued behaved; it had made him a world-class stalker. And now he was officially in retirement, never to stalk again.

When the O.W.L.s were over, Harry was sitting down by the lake, throwing stones across its rippling surface. Jamie was sitting with him, having finished her third-year exams. They didn't talk; Jamie had tried drawing him out during the previous month, but his silent brooding had finally defeated

her best efforts, and now when they were sitting silently together, she simply let him brood.

Draco was off shagging some girl, Harry couldn't even remember who. It had definitely not helped Harry to see Draco and Niamh in the library. Jamie didn't know what Draco was up to, and Harry wanted it to stay that way. I'll just take a vow of celibacy, Harry thought. There; I'm already doing quite nicely at it. No problem. Who knew I had such a hidden talent?

Suddenly, a shadow passed over him; he looked up, expecting to see his best friend, done with his playboy activities, but it wasn't Draco Malfoy.

"Hello," Ginny said nervously. "How've you been?" Harry looked up at her; he did not respond. He turned back to the lake, hoping that she would prove to be a figment of his imagination. "Could--could I speak to you privately?" He still did not respond. "Please?" He looked up at her again and nodded. Then he looked at Jamie, who had a rather shocked expression on her face.

"Go on. I'll wait here for Draco." Harry stood and followed Ginny wordlessly. They walked down to the old gamekeeper's cottage, then round to where it backed up to the forest. Ginny wrung her hands in front of her.

"So," she began awkwardly. "You didn't say. How you've been, I mean."

Harry looked at her dully. "All right," he said softly.

She swallowed; her eyes were glistening. "Look, I've wanted to do this properly, and I've been working up the nerve. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am. You--you didn't deserve that. I was doing just what you said I was; playing with your feelings. It was cruel and horrible. I'm just a horrid, horrid person, and I don't deserve for you or anyone else to notice that I exist ever again..."

She had tears flowing freely down her cheeks now and Harry's heart turned over; as much as he'd been trying to convince himself that he hated her, it hadn't really worked, and seeing her in such distress, it was impossible for him not to be moved. His own throat tightened and he felt tears prickling against his eyelids as he held his arms out to her. She moved into them with an inarticulate cry, throwing her arms around his back, putting her head on his chest, weeping convulsively

now. He looked down at the top of her head, stroking her bright hair, leaning his cheek on its surprising softness.

"I forgive you," he whispered after a while. She cried a little harder, grasping him harder as well, and he felt her body warm against his, felt his celibacy resolve growing rather weak...

At last she separated herself from him; he handed her a handkerchief and she blew her nose noisily. He tried not to smile; she was obviously still distressed. Her eyes were very red and her face was a bit blotchy. She started to hand him the handkerchief, but he pushed it away.

"Keep it," he said shortly. She nodded and put it in her robe pocket. They stood not touching, looking down and then up at each other.

"You know," she said, "it's been rather lonely. Walking about the castle without you being nearby. I've never known what that's like," she smiled at him bashfully. He gave her a small smile back.

"I've been trying to come up with a new hobby."

"Any luck?"

"Not yet."

She smiled more now. "I think," she said, "that part of the problem was that I bought into the old anti-Slytherin propaganda. I mean, if a boy from Gryffindor or Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff had been stalking me, I might very well have been flattered. Well, it might depend on who it was, but still; I wouldn't have automatically decided that it was creepy."

He winced. "Creepy?"

She too winced. "Sorry. Bad choice of words. What I meant was, I never took you seriously. I didn't consider who you were: a nice person who calls his sister one of his best friends when he could just ignore her and belittle her like other brothers do their sisters--I know. A person who--who gave me some beautiful Valentine's cards and birthday cards--"

"You knew that was me?" he asked, reddening.

"Um--it was a little obvious. Did you write those poems yourself?"

"Yes," he admitted.

She smiled. "I liked them. Not that I could admit that to Annika and Zoey. Or even to myself. But I did like them. They were good. But I ignored all that and only saw the Slytherin, not the person. Then, when I hurt you--" her voice caught again, "and when we were on the stairs that day--that's when I finally saw the person. A person I'd hurt very much."

He held out his hand and she took it. "A person who just forgave you."

She squeezed his hand gratefully. "Thank you. I don't deserve it, but thank you."

She moved closer to him and started to touch his cheek with her lips, but he turned his head and their lips made contact; she drew back after only a second, looking in his eyes and seeing there the unmistakable evidence of his feelings. Their lips were drawn together again; when Harry felt her mouth open under his, he gasped in the back of his throat and held her more tightly. She trembled in his arms, and he was feeling pretty shaky in the knees himself, but he didn't want to end the kiss so they could sit, he just wanted it to go on and on...

Harry braced himself, but no Gryffindors burst from the forest foliage, pointing fingers and laughing at how he'd been duped again. She didn't run from him, laughing with her friends; she didn't recoil and make a face as though she'd been made to do something disgusting. She was here, in his arms at last, clinging to him and kissing him, while he inhaled her sweet breath and treasured every moment.

He forced himself to pull away from her; he examined her face, remembering now, remembering how he had felt when she broke his heart, then how happy he was when she came to him for forgiveness, and they kissed properly for the first time. Harry swallowed; there was so much to take in every minute of every day in this life. He smoothed her hair away from her face; she looked at him with a bemused expression. He knew they were sneaking around, that they hadn't told anyone about their relationship. He hadn't told Jamie and Draco (he wouldn't have told his little brothers in any case); she hadn't told her friends or Ron or anyone else in her family. He remembered the terrible ramifications of sneaking around with Hermione. *Hermione*, he thought for a moment. *What about Hermione?* Did this constitute cheating on her? He needed to think...He had to find a way to get her to stop kissing him for a bit so he could *think*, because the moment she attached her mouth to his...

But he'd no sooner thought this than she'd done it again, and he was holding her to him tightly once more when he realized that this was exactly what he was trying to *stop* her from doing. He had to get her talking; what could they talk about? Well, he thought, here I am all over again, embroiled in a secret relationship which will eat away at my insides if we don't rectify the situation. We could talk about that. He broke the kiss.

"Ginny," he said nervously, putting his hands on her shoulders. "W-why don't we go up to Charlie's office right now and tell him and Draco about us. They went there to have tea after our class was over and I said I'd be along eventually. Why don't we both go, come clean with them, stop sneaking around?"

Ginny looked at him in shock. "You're mad!" she declared.

"But--but Charlie--he likes me. We're friends. He called me one of his best students..."

"Sure, he likes you now. But if we tell him *this*...trust me. He would no longer like you. Your name would be mud."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

"Why? Because every one of my brothers, to a man, has decided I'm to be treated like a four year old for the rest of my life, that's why. Well, okay, Ron's not like that, but if anything, he's *worse*; he's been trying to get me together with Neville Longbottom for a year now. And I smile at him and I'm nice to him--I mean, he's not a bad bloke--but I make *absolutely certain* that I'm never alone with him. I don't want to give him the wrong idea. Charlie's even tried to get him to lay off of the Neville thing, but it's not because he doesn't think I should be with Neville; it's because he doesn't think I should be with *anyone*. The rest are the same. All card-carrying members of the Keep Ginny True To Her Name Club."

Harry made a face. "What?"

She looked at Harry shrewdly. "What's my name?"

"Ginny," he answered immediately.

"That's not my proper name. What's my *name*?"

"Oh. Virginia." He looked at her blankly; then it hit him. "Oooh--"

"Right."

Harry flushed. He searched his memory; if Ginny *wasn't* a virgin because of *him* he certainly hoped he'd remember that. But try as he might, he

could not recall the two of them sleeping together. He was *fairly* confident they had not... "Well," he said tentatively, "you are still..." He was hoping she wouldn't bash in his skull for not remembering some "unforgettable" night of passion. To his relief she sighed and put her head on his shoulder.

"Yes, but you know overprotective big brothers..."

Harry grimaced, thinking of Jamie's crush on Draco. On the other hand, *he* wasn't Draco Malfoy, sleeping with as many girls as possible in as short a time as possible. Draco would just break his sister's heart.

"I know from experience. But if Jamie liked someone who was really good for her, I'd feel differently..."

She smiled knowingly. "Your own best friend isn't good enough for her, eh?"

"You know about that?"

"Oh, she's very obvious. Every time he's around it's written all over her. She's got it bad."

Harry sighed. "I know. And if I warned her off, she'd scream at me and tell me I thought of her as a child and that I didn't want her to be happy..."

Ginny nodded and smiled. "Yes. And if we told Ron or Charlie about us, I'd have one dead boyfriend and two brothers on their way to Azkaban. It's too soon."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Well then--what about on my end?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well--why can't we at least tell Jamie and Draco? She's my sister and one of my best friends, and he's my other best friend."

She looked like she was caught out without the time to think of a plausible reason to reject the idea. "I don't know..."

"Well, here's a really good reason to tell them: I ran into Mariah Kirkner in the corridor in the girls' dorm, and--"

"What were you doing in the girls' dorm?" Her voice had a dangerous edge to it.

"I was going to talk to Jamie. Anyway, *she* told me that she was 'available' for, um, stuff, and that it was Draco's idea. I hinted around that I had a girlfriend but couldn't tell them yet who it was, and they don't

believe me, so Draco's trying to put me together with Mariah. If I could tell him you really exist, he'd stop. Plus, you get along with my sister. I'd like for us all to be able to be together; my life feels so chopped up right now."

She considered this. "I do like your sister. I've only talked to her a couple of times, but she's all right. Oh! I know! That could be our cover. If all four of us are seen together, especially by Ron; I could tell him that Jamie's my friend. He'd probably throw a snit about her being Slytherin, but it'd be safer than telling him you're my boyfriend. The only problem is that I do have two girlfriends already. Maybe sometime I can see whether Annika and Zoey mind Jamie hanging out with us. Perhaps we can be seen doing that first; then it would be plausible when I'm seen with her and Draco and you."

Harry smiled; this actually sounded like a reasonable plan, and he wouldn't have to lie to his sister and Draco any more. He cupped her cheek in his hand, gazing at her; he felt like both the luckiest and most confused sixteen-year-old boy in the world. Although he knew he would feel dreadfully guilty later, he let himself be swept away by her as their lips met again and he gathered her into his arms...

* * * *

Later of course, he thought of Hermione. *Hermione*. He pictured her, going running with him in the mornings, her angry face when he'd kissed Ginny after the Quidditch match, sunning herself in the bikini on Privet Drive, looking up at him in surprise after they slept together for the first time (without the sleeping); he remembered too that heartbreakingly expression on her face as she walked toward Ron after the pub explosion...

He was lying in bed, staring at the darkness; he swallowed, thinking now of Ron's face in the forest, before he performed the Cruciatus Curse. Ron gazing at Hermione repeatedly during the year, then telling Harry *he* wasn't in love with her...

Harry suddenly missed Ron so badly it hurt. Whatever Hermione's motivation had been, whether the potion was ultimately to blame for her actions, or whether she had a feeling that Harry was not long for this world, *he* should have done the right thing. He knew how Ron felt about her, had known since the Yule Ball. He remembered how Ron had watched her all night (she was astonishingly pretty that evening) and he remembered also their argument afterward. Now Harry wished he'd shoved the two of them into a cupboard and commanded them, "Snog already!" It would have solved many, many problems.

Did Hermione just want to be with him before he got himself killed? He didn't want to think that, but then he realized *he* was probably guilty of

exactly the same thing. He'd pursued the girl he knew his best friend loved. He'd wished they could have had sex before Sirius showed up on New Year's so he'd experience that before his death...Had Ron suspected that? Was he really accusing *Harry* of that, claiming he thought it was Hermione's motivation?

Yes. I did that, he thought. Guilty as charged. I thought it was my due as a marked man, and I took what wasn't mine...

He felt almost relieved, deciding this. He didn't even want to count the number of times he'd used Hermione just to make himself feel better or to distract himself. And Ron--how hard it must have been for Ron to tell him not to break up with her after Dudley died.

Finally, there was Ginny. His thoughts and memories of her were an amalgam of his two lives. He smiled at the mental image of her putting her elbow in the butter, or dropping things when he was around. He'd mainly been annoyed at the time because he'd thought the only thing about him that appealed to her was his fame. In this life, he had no fame, and she'd thought of him as the strange boy from Slytherin who followed her around. And now she was with him because she thought he was sensitive and liked that he'd been unafraid to show how he felt about her. They'd discovered many other things they had in common when they wrote to each other during the summer. Ginny. Yes, Ginny. He felt a happiness inside that was also a kind of peace. He knew now. He didn't have to deny it anymore...

But, he knew, that was just in this life. He still needed to fix the timelines, and in his other life, everything was a mess. He needed to apologize to Ron, he needed to find a way to gently end things with Hermione and steer her toward Ron without losing either of them as friends. And Ginny; she was with Draco Malfoy in that other life. He'd betrayed his father for her. Harry frowned. That would be stickier than anything concerning Ron or Hermione. It would be one thing if Ginny were still crushing on Harry, but she wasn't. She was in love with Draco. He sighed; he would have to wait and see. First he had to *find* Hermione in the Muggle world, in case there was any chance she could help him. Then he would think about the rest.

So it was more because he was thinking of Draco Malfoy than Hermione Granger when he made a conscious decision to postpone telling people about his relationship with Ginny. Ginny didn't notice, however; she was waiting for him to take the lead with this, so she didn't bother him about it. And during their meetings behind the greenhouse, they talked about almost anything but telling people about their relationship. They did things other than talking, too, but he tried to cut that short and return to the talking; he didn't want to become too attached to that part of their relationship. She had such a sharp, insightful mind, and he could vent to her about his mother in a way he couldn't to Jamie and Draco. Then he

realized that he should be honest with her about his parents, and when he told her, she was surprised and yet not. She kissed him soundly and said, "You poor thing..." before kissing him again, then running her lips down his throat, making it very hard for him to stick to his resolve...

As the days passed, he returned to the position of wanting to tell Jamie and Draco, but now he felt awkward and unsure of how to do it. There was also the matter of finding the Invisibility Cloak. He waited over a week before he asked Sirius about it; after the reaction he'd gotten in the first Transfiguration class, when he'd brought up his godfather's "extracurricular" activities during his school days, Harry thought bringing up something else from that time would be ill-advised if done too soon. To his disappointment, Sirius had no idea where it was.

"Have you tried asking down at the Quidditch pitch?" he asked Harry. Harry furrowed his brow. Why did Sirius keep saying that?"

"No."

"Well, maybe your mother will know."

Harry grimaced; asking Mum was Jamie's job. It was yet another week before Jamie found a way to do it unobtrusively, while helping her mother dice pickled mandrake root in the Potions dungeon.

"I asked her, 'So, did my father leave anything for us? For me and Harry? In a will?' And she said, 'Oh, is that why you volunteered to help me?' And I said, 'No, of course not.' And she said--"

"Jamie!" Harry cried, exasperated. "Just get to the point. Does she know where it is?"

She frowned at Harry. They had met in the anteroom off the Great Hall again. It was just the two of them; Draco was doing a detention with Professor Sinistra, who'd caught him snogging Fiona Fawcett in the Astronomy Tower.

"At least she caught us while it was still snogging..." Draco had said brightly, cheered by the fact that he'd been caught doing something relatively minor (although it still warranted a detention; Professor Sinistra was trying to kill the Astronomy Tower's reputation as a lover's trysting place). He would be meticulously cleaning all of the lenses to all of Sinistra's telescopes (using no magic) until dinner at least.

"No," his sister said. "She denied it existed. But I think she's wondering how I knew about it at all..."

Harry was horrified. "You didn't ask her straight out, I hope?"

"No, of course not. I went through a whole bunch of other things first. I said, 'Did our father have a crystal ball?' and she said he didn't, and I said, 'How about a Sneakoscope?' and she said no, they weren't around back then, and I said--"

Harry's head hurt; he was actually starting to miss his scar-headaches. "I get it, I get it. What happened when you asked her about the Invisibility Cloak?"

"Well, she got this funny look. I said, 'Did he have an Invisibility Cloak?' and she just stopped chopping. I suggested she put her knife down, but she just stood there, holding it really tightly. Her knuckles were white. I had to sort of call to her, you know, 'Mum? Mum?' She didn't even care that I wasn't calling her 'Professor Evans.' And when she noticed me again, she said no, he didn't have an Invisibility Cloak."

"Hmm," was Harry's answer. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but I suppose we have to write a letter to Remus. I wanted to avoid there being anything on paper, in case it fell into the wrong hands..."

"Remember the last time we saw Remus?" Jamie asked him softly. Harry was startled. When was the last time? Then, with a shiver, he remembered; it had been during the summer after his second year at Hogwarts...

He was in bed when they came. His room was at the front of the house, the front door sheltered by his bay window. He heard the pounding on the front door, heard his parents' footfalls as they ran down to answer it. It was the middle of the night.

"Ministry of Magic business!" came a cry from below, then more pounding. "Take the wards off the house!"

Harry ran to the window; in the drive before the house there was a horseless carriage, but it was not an orange, pumpkin-like Hogwarts carriage; this was boxy and purple, and there were bars on the windows. Two large wizards stood outside it looking very alert, their wands drawn, dark sweeping robes making it difficult to see anything but their faces in the darkness. There was no moon.

Harry crept to his bedroom door, opening it just wide enough to squeeze through. He saw that Jamie was already in the corridor, which was actually a balcony that looked over the front hall; she knelt by the banister. He joined her; there was a circle of light from four wands below, but no one had lit any lamps or candles. He and his sister were invisible to the adults; none of them took any notice of an eleven-year-old girl

and a thirteen-year-old boy crouched in the shadows above them.

Their mother was wearing a dressing gown over her night dress, her long red hair pulled into a plait that reached her waist. Their stepfather was still wearing his at-home robes, slightly frayed at the edges; he reserved these for sitting in his study for long hours, reading or writing, or sometimes working on potions in the lab in the attic. (Children were prevented from entering; an age-line did not even permit anyone under the age of eighteen to get past the first step).

Their parents were facing two Aurors, a man and a woman. The man was tall, with sandy hair and light eyes; the woman had curly cropped reddish-blond hair and glittering blue eyes. They made a handsome pair. Their robes were deep purple, with embroidered badges replicating the Ministry of Magic seal. They faced Lily Evans and Severus Snape with their wands lit, but looked like they would be more than willing to use the wands for something other than lighting if necessary.

"Where is it, Lily?" the woman asked.

"HE, Gemma. Remus is a person, not a thing. I told you, the Ministry doesn't have to worry about him. He's fine; Severus and I both know how to make the Wolfsbane Potion. We do it for him every month; we Apparate wherever he is and take it to him. You don't have to do this..."

"Lily, I know you've changed since James' death," the woman looked sneeringly at Severus Snape, "but you are a former Auror. You know the law. The Decree for the Internment of Lycanthropic Humans was not written with any exceptions. We used to work together, Lily. The last thing I want to do is take you in for harboring a fugitive. Please cooperate. Go get the werewolf."

"I've changed? Look at you and Frank! Doing everything you're told without questioning any of it! This isn't right, Gemma, and you know it. Remus isn't a danger to anyone. A fugitive is someone who's done something wrong--which Remus hasn't."

The sandy-haired man sighed. "Now, Lily, be reasonable. The Ministry decided to relocate all werewolves into these camps because the biggest danger is not what they'll do at the full moon, it's that they'll be recruited by You-Know-Who. You have to admit, we've done pretty well to keep the Death Eater activity down..."

"Oh, yes," his mother sneered sarcastically. "Of course, he doesn't really need Death Eaters, does he, when you're doing Voldemort's bloody work for him, detaining innocent people in 'relocation camps!'"

"Do innocent people, in your experience, become ravenous beasts three nights a month, Lily?" the man said. "Don't be stupid and naive. Remus Lupin has access to Wolfsbane Potion through you two only as long as he chooses to take it; if he didn't show up one month, what could you do? What recourse would you have? How do you propose to hunt him down and force him to take it?"

"The other twenty-five days of the lunar cycle they're PEOPLE. And Remus would never make us chase him down like that," she said through her teeth. She raised her wand, looking distinctly like it was going to be something other than a substitute torch in a moment. "Have you solved the Squib disappearances yet, Frank?" she challenged him. "How old is that little problem--six, seven years? Or does the Ministry even consider it to be a problem? All those people--gone. No trace. But the Ministry wants to look like it's doing something, so let's lock up people who haven't done anything, let's do that instead of finding almost a thousand people who vanished overnight..."

"Yes, the Ministry does want to be seen doing something, taking steps before anything dreadful happens. Don't you think we wish we had thought to protect the Squibs? No one saw that coming. That's why the Hogwarts board of governors stopped sending letters to Muggle-born students. That way, whatever happened to those Squibs won't happen to any new Muggle-borns entering the wizarding world. And now we're acting on the werewolf problem so that we might avoid a--"

"Who said it was a problem?" she demanded.

He clenched his jaw angrily. "Do you want an army of werewolves under You-Know-Who's power sweeping through Hogsmeade under the next full moon?"

"Oh, Frank, talk like an adult! Say Voldemort!" she spat at him. Harry did think he sounded rather silly; an Auror who couldn't say the name of the person he was supposed to be fighting. The argument would have continued, but his dad stepped between the two of them, facing the man.

"Remus Lupin is my wife's old friend and our guest. I will ask you now to leave my house, Longbottom, before you wake my

children," Severus Snape said to him, in a voice to freeze boiling water.

"We're not leaving without the werewolf!" the woman said.

The man took a step toward Snape; his voice became as chilling as Harry's stepfather's voice. Harry shivered as he listened to him, and noticed that goose bumps had risen on his sister's arms. "I'm not surprised a Slytherin is protecting a werewolf. That just fits, doesn't it? What should we expect from someone who consorts with Lucius Malfoy?"

His dad didn't back down; if anything, it looked like he had moved closer to the Auror. His voice was soft, yet very clear in the dark entrance hall. "If you knew anything about anything, Longbottom, you'd know that I'm the least likely person in the world to be giving sanctuary to this particular werewolf. But obviously, we don't have the time to discuss your abundant ignorance..." Harry fought the urge to cheer his stepfather on; when he wanted to be insulting and condescending, no one could beat his dad.

The Auror blinked and Harry could see him swallow. When he spoke again, his voice shook ever so slightly. "I can't wait for the day when I have something on you, Snape. Maybe this is that day, eh? When I think of you teaching my sons..." Harry couldn't believe the hatred he heard in the man's voice. He swallowed. Were his parents going to kick the Aurors out of the house? Were the Aurors going to arrest his parents? What would happen to him and Jamie and the twins if that happened? Surely they wouldn't let him, a thirteen-year-old boy, be the head of the household? He was going to be in his third year in September and his sister in first year, but his brothers still had two years to go at the village school.

Suddenly a familiar, thin figure appeared from a door behind the Aurors. They whirled, and the woman pointed her wand, crying, "Stupefy!" Remus Lupin fell to the floor, and Harry winced when he heard the werewolf's body make contact with the hard tile.

"Remus!" his mother cried, going to her knees at his side. She glared up at the Aurors. "You didn't have to do that! His wand wasn't even drawn!" She revived him and he sat up, with help, blinking and shaking his head. "Are you all right, Remus?"

He nodded, then placed his hand on her arm. "It's fine, Lily. I've made my peace with it. I know you mean well, but I

suppose it was just a matter of time before they came for me. I'll go quietly. I don't want any trouble for your family."

"Trouble? Remus, this isn't right! Just imprisoning a whole class of people because they might do something violent, or might join Voldemort...you're being convicted without a trial. Or even a crime. Does that sound right to you?"

"Lily," the man said, trying to reason with her again. "The Minister of Magic--"

--can go screw himself!" his mother said vehemently. "I did not volunteer to live in a 'benevolent dictatorship' when I started attending Hogwarts. In the Muggle world there's a little thing called democracy, and another thing called civil rights. Frank, the things I saw while I was an Auror...half of it was in violation of the Geneva Convention. And you want me to think of you as reasonable? As someone doing the right thing?"

He shook his head pityingly. "Lily, still thinking like a Muggle. I don't know what this 'Geneva Convention' of yours is, but need I remind you that Muggles don't have to deal with prisoners who can do magic? We need to take a hard line with dark wizards and dark creatures because they are far more dangerous than Muggles with guns or bombs."

"I disagree. But even the dark wizards in Azkaban are there because they've actually done something. Truthfully, I think many dark wizards are just misguided..."

Longbottom smirked, looking at her husband. But he didn't talk about Snape; he wasn't that foolish. He went in a different direction. "Is that what you think of Pettigrew now?"

She moved to within a couple of inches of him. "Peter didn't start out evil. He was--looking for something. Somewhere along the way he lost the ability to choose between right and wrong. And I'm not so sure you've learned that either, Frank. You'd better tell Barty Crouch to look to his own house before he raids anyone else's!" Then she suddenly clapped her hand on her own mouth; she looked like she hadn't meant to say that. Remus Lupin looked at her, shaking his head.

"It's no good Lily. It's over; I'll go. I understand there are some rather nice camps, in the mountains. Owl me; I know they permit that. I'll write back as often as I'm allowed. Say goodbye to the children for me."

"Remus!" she choked, as he stood and the man grabbed him by the upper arm. The woman grabbed his other arm. As the two of them guided him under the balcony where Harry and Jamie knelt, toward the door, their mother and stepfather stood with their arms around each other, and they heard their mother crying.

Harry stood quietly, motioning to Jamie to follow him. They crept into his bedroom and ran swiftly and silently to the bay window. They looked down at the drive; the two men who'd been waiting outside the house held their wands aloft to better light the area behind the carriage. The man who held Remus Lupin's upper arm in a vise-like grip opened the barred door and threw the werewolf into the rear of the carriage. He used his wand to put a locking charm on the door.

The man and woman who'd dragged Remus from their house followed the other two men into the carriage and it started to move away, but suddenly there was a loud BANG! and it was gone. The drive was empty.

Harry heard his parents climb the stairs and walk down the corridor to their bedroom; their footsteps were slow, and Harry thought he could hear his mother continuing to cry. He and Jamie still sat on the window seat; Harry noticed that Jamie was also crying. He was trying not to break down himself.

"C'mere, James," he said to her softly, patting his leg. She laid down on the cushion, pillowng her head on his thigh. He stroked her hair gently until he thought she'd fallen asleep. When he stopped, she suddenly spoke.

"We're not ever going to see him again, are we?" Her voice was soft and thick with tears.

Harry was silent for a long minute. He turned his head to look down at the drive, where the purple carriage had been. He whispered, "I don't know, James."

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice catching. "I remember the last time we saw Remus." They didn't speak for a minute. "Well, if that's all you have to tell me right now, I'm going to do my Animagus exercises. You'd better go."

She frowned. "Why? Is there some reason I can't stay and watch?"

He hesitated; he'd only ever done the preliminary work in front of Professor McGonagall.

"Okay. But be quiet and don't distract me."

She sat silently, her eyes wide, while her brother manipulated his bone structure for an hour. At one point he lengthened his left leg to five feet and then brought it back to normal, gasping from the pain, and he saw her wince in sympathy. When he was done, he sat in a puddle of robes on the floor, catching his breath. He'd been doing better with his running every day, and he'd been executing some additional exercises for upper-body strength. He'd become accustomed again to the pain from exercising, and that had once more helped him to acclimate himself to the pain of the Animagus training. Still, he was winded, and Jamie sat looking at him in awe, for once struck dumb.

When he found the strength to stand again, she too stood; she seemed almost afraid of him now. "Harry," she said softly, "how did you find out how to do this?"

He swallowed; it was a good question, and he hadn't thought of how to fudge this. In theory, he *could* tell her about his other life, but then he'd probably be writing to her from St. Mungo's for the rest of his life...

"Well, um, when Draco and I were studying for the O.W.L.s, we snuck into the library the night before the Transfiguration test to look up some things..." It was partly true; Harry felt much more comfortable with lies when they had a grain of truth to them. "I went into the Restricted Section, in case there was something there that would give me a leg up on the others, and I found this book on the Animagus Transfiguration. I copied down all of the important information and put the book back, and I saved what I wrote."

"Where is it?" she asked eagerly. "Can I see?"

"Um..." Okay, he thought, so I should have realized she'd ask that. Stupid, stupid... "Sorry. I, um, charmed the parchment so only I can read it. There's no way to take the spell off without destroying it." He didn't know whether that was plausible, but it was the best he could do.

"Oh," she said glumly, not arguing. Well, he reasoned, she was only in fourth year. If what I just said is impossible, she might not have any way of knowing. He'd noticed that the curriculum in general seemed to be a few years behind the Hogwarts to which he was accustomed. Why should they be given *less* challenging work and less of it when there were no longer Muggle-born students at the school? It was yet another unanswered question, and he was starting to get very, very tired of those.

They were about to leave when he had a sudden thought and stopped her. "Jamie, just a minute. I have something to tell you."

She was perplexed. "I thought you said you didn't find out about the cloak either."

"Oh, it's not about that. It's completely different. You might want to sit."

She was looking progressively more confused. Harry hesitated. He hadn't told Ginny he was going to do this today, but wanted to get it over with before he lost his nerve. "You know how I said I had a girlfriend?"

Now she smiled. "Oh. So you're finally going to admit you were making it up? Honestly, Harry, don't you think Draco and I can tell when you're ly--"

"It's Ginny Weasley," he said suddenly. She froze, her bright green eyes wide with disbelief.

"What?" she finally croaked.

Harry couldn't stop a smile from spreading across his face; he was so happy to be able to tell her. "I said it's--"

"I heard what you said. *Ginny Weasley?* Are you daft?"

Harry stopped smiling. "What do you mean?"

Jamie threw up her hands and paced. "Do you need *another* reason for her brother to hate you? To want to kill you? Are you suicidal or something? I thought you'd finally come to your senses when you stopped stalking her--and thank you for being the creepy brother-from-hell for four years, that makes it really easy to make friends--but now you're saying she's your girlfriend? Aren't you--you know--still upset about that bet?"

He smiled again bashfully. "That bet was the best thing that ever happened to me. When she came to me to apologize--you remember? We were down by the lake?--we sort of, um, kissed and made up. Literally."

"Kissed?"

Harry nodded. Jamie got a look of understanding on her face now. "And the revenge on Ron Weasley you talked about this summer? That was--"

"Well, I just figured that he'd find out about us eventually, and he wouldn't be too happy. Kind of a fringe benefit. Not that I'm with Ginny just to get to him; if anything, a lot of his animosity comes from the fact that I used to follow her around..."

"Harry! Are you insane? She's from Gryffindor and you're from Slytherin. It's a match made in hell. Break up with her."

Harry paused. "Jamie--when you were sorted, did the hat give you a choice?"

She looked shaken. "What do you mean?"

"Did it mention any other houses besides Slytherin?"

Jamie hesitated. "Well, I--I mean--

"Because it gave me a choice. Between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

She'd found her voice again. "Me too! And--and I was so nervous and--and--does this mean we should have been in Gryffindor?"

"Well, I think it might mean we have a little Gryffindor in us. I feel so connected to Ginny, Jamie..."

"Mm hm," she said, with a more knowing look than Harry felt any fourteen-year-old girl should have. "And just how 'connected' have you gotten?"

Harry reddened. "Not *that* kind of connected. I know it sounds like big trouble, but can't you just be happy for me? And look at mum and dad. She was in Gryffindor and he was in Slytherin. And they dated in school, too."

Jamie put her hands on her hips. "Don't try to distract me. We're talking about you. Put yourself in her brother's shoes. When he finds out--I mean, what would you do if *he* came after *me*?"

Harry grimaced. "He's not the one I'm worried about..."

Jamie blushed. "Well, there you go. Think of Draco coming after me..." She was still blushing; he thought she might be thinking a little too vividly about Draco coming after her.

Harry shook himself. "Okay. *Think* about Draco. I know how you feel about him, James; don't protest, a lot of people know. Ginny knows; she says you're pretty obvious. I'm pretty sure Draco knows too, but he doesn't do anything because of your age and the fact that you're my sister and he doesn't want to mess up a good friendship."

"Did you warn him off?" Her voice was dangerous and he saw her put her hand in her wand-pocket.

"No, I think he's decided that on his own. But what I mean is, think about how you feel about him, go on; close your eyes and think about it. Then imagine if I said, 'Stop it! You're not allowed to feel that way any more!' Would that have any effect? Would it do any good? I can't help the way I

feel, Jamie. I knew Ginny was wonderful before, but now that I know her even better..." He remembered the letters they'd exchanged during the summer. Their relationship had grown with the help of parchment and ink as much as kisses. He felt now that she knew him as well as his sister and best friend.

Jamie looked at him, her large eyes shining, and she gasped. "You're really in love, aren't you?" she whispered. He started stuttering; he couldn't seem to get words out of his mouth. His heart seemed to be going a mile a minute. Then he was surprised by Jamie stepping forward and enveloping him in a hug. When she pulled back and looked at him, he saw approval at last in her large green eyes. "Oh, Harry, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I thought it was just that obsession you had taking on a new life..." She shook her head in wonder. "Congratulations."

He leaned over quickly and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks. I knew I could get you to understand." He thought about how happy he felt telling Jamie about Ginny; he couldn't once recall feeling happy about telling anyone about him and Hermione. That had been so complicated. His head was hurting again; he did not want to think about this now. He tried to distract his sister.

"She likes you, you know. And you two already get on. Which is something else I wanted to talk to you about. We thought it would be good if you start hanging out with her and her friends. Then when she's with you and me and Draco, she can say it's because she's friends with you, if anyone questions it."

"What? Now I'm supposed to give you some cover story?"

"Plus, she could help us get the cloak or map or something. Or she could help with something else."

"And it's going to be so plausible for a fourth-year Slytherin to hang out with a fifth-year Gryffindor and her friends..."

"Well, make it plausible. Use your imagination. Or she'll probably think of something. She's very smart. Give her a chance."

Jamie grimaced. "What about those other Gryffindor friends? Wasn't it an idea one of them had to have her kiss you when she'd lost a bet? They sound like bit--"

"The word is 'witches,' Jamie, and shall I remind you that you're one too?" he smiled mischievously. She sighed. "And anyway, you're always complaining that you don't get on with any of the fourth year Slytherin girls. Ginny's friends can't be any worse, can they?"

"Famous last words..." she said gloomily. Harry laughed.

"Thanks! You won't regret this!" He took the locking charm off the door and when they opened it, they walked right into Draco, who'd finally finished his detention and had come looking for them.

"Draco!" he said jovially. His friend looked at him suspiciously.

"Why do I think I'm about to be talked into doing something no one in their right mind should do?" he drawled wearily, walking into the room and sinking to the floor, leaning against the stone wall. Harry laughed again while he closed and relocked the door.

"Because being my friend has made you jaded about this stuff. Look, it's good news. You know that girlfriend you think I made up?"

Draco looked up at him, frowning. "Yeah?"

He smiled at his best friend.

"Well--I didn't."

* * * * *

Harry had to keep reminding himself that he was supposed to continue to look for the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map; he couldn't remember when he'd been so happy, and he was sometimes afraid he wouldn't be able to pry himself away from this life when the time came. In addition to the ease with which Ginny had joined the trio of him, his sister and Draco, and his pleasure in seeing the way his girlfriend and his sister got on, his studies were ridiculously easy and even his potions work had improved, in his mother's eyes.

The first Quidditch match was coming up soon, too, between Ravenclaw and Slytherin, and Harry had to spend more and more time with the Slytherin team, getting them ready. Somehow he had more enthusiasm for strategizing and preparing the team for a match than he had when he was the Gryffindor captain in his other life. He was looking forward to the match; he wouldn't be playing Seeker, of course, but Keeper was better than nothing. He thought about the match in third year when Ginny had caught the Snitch and Slytherin had still won...*that* was what it was all about. *That* was Quidditch. In fact, that match was responsible for his being team captain...

After Harry and Draco had been carried back to the dungeons, a celebration ensued in the Slytherin common room which was rather odd, as the people being feted were too exhausted to do much beyond nod and smile feebly. Harry dragged himself to the third-year dorm and collapsed on top of his bedcover still fully clothed. He had started to doze off when he heard

heavy footsteps enter the room. He opened his eyes a crack; it was his dad, Severus Snape, head of Slytherin House.

"Harry?" he asked tentatively. Harry opened his eyes a crack. His dad was standing by his bed.

"Mmm?" was the only response Harry could manage.

His dad sat on the bed and patted Harry's leg. "You really made me proud today, you know that? That was some match..."

Harry smiled feebly. "I learned from the master," he croaked hoarsely.

His dad grinned at him. "I think the student has surpassed the teacher." Harry found it hard not to grin himself. His dad continued, "I have some news. The whole team is unanimous, including Flint. Next year, they want you to be the captain."

Harry felt wide awake now. He propped himself up on his elbows. "What? I'll only be fourth year."

His dad smiled even more broadly. "Youngest Quidditch captain in the history of the school."

"And I was only reserve this year..."

"Still. They want you. It's an honor, Harry. And I think you can do it. As your head of house, I'm asking you to do it for Slytherin." His eyes twinkled at Harry. Harry finally smiled back at his dad.

"All right. I'll do it."

His dad stood again. "That's my boy. I'll deliver the good news. You go back to sleep; you've worked hard today."

Harry didn't need to be told twice. He flopped back onto his pillow. After a minute, he heard a roar of acclamation go up from the crowd in the common room, but it quickly faded from his consciousness as Harry drifted into sleep...

* * * * *

Harry had written a letter to Remus Lupin in which he tried to ask about the Invisibility Cloak in a roundabout way. He looked over some old letters from Remus first, to remind himself of what his life was like in the camp. Remus sounded rather like he was putting a good face on things. He was

in a camp for wizard werewolves; there were separate camps for Muggle werewolves, which were the rule, while wizard werewolves were the exception. There were seventy-three men and fifty-four women in his camp. The werewolves were transported every day to work in a china factory the Ministry had built. It seemed a very proper business to the Muggle world, and in fact they sold mostly to the Muggles. Remus had discovered he was quite good at the fine detail work; he spent his days painting designs around the edges of cups and saucers and plates...Usually hand-painted dishes were very dear, but this factory was able to offer their wares at astonishingly low prices, and their orders had quadrupled in only five years. Of course, Harry thought grimly, they're doing it with slave-labor, so it *would* be cheaper than other people's hand-painted stuff...

Harry was reminded again of why he needed to change things back when he read Remus' letters. Not that he ever complained to Harry or even made it seem like he was doing anything out of the ordinary; but his simple descriptions of life in the camps were often very poignant, such as when Remus wrote about his coworker disappearing the morning after the full moon. This happened every month. Rather than go to the trouble of dosing them all with Wolfsbane Potion, when the moon was full they took advantage of some Muggle technology and the fences around the camps were electrified. Aurors surrounded the camps armed with Muggle guns loaded with silver bullets, and the transfigured humans were left to their own devices. They slashed and tore at each other and were left with horrible wounds when they became human again in the morning. They tried to leap at the fence to get at the humans they could see just beyond their reach. Contact with the fence meant dreadful burns and a singed smell that followed one around for weeks afterward. Unfortunately, it did not mean death, since silver was necessary to bring that relief to a lycanthrope. But there always seemed to be someone who stubbornly disregarded the pain from the fence and climbed over; they were immediately killed by the Aurors. Some lunar cycles it was more than one.

Remus had heard about someone who had managed to smuggle silver into the camps from the factory and commit suicide; there was a silver shiv rumored to be hidden somewhere in one of the women's barracks in the wizarding camp. People were looking for it, for some sort of escape. Remus discounted the rumor; Harry shuddered. To think that one should find living as a werewolf so horrible that death seemed preferable. Or was it life in the camps that had made some of them suicidal?

The morning of the first Quidditch match, Harry received a reply from Remus. He was sitting in the Great Hall eating breakfast, and a brown owl settled on his shoulder. Harry took the parchment and fed the owl, then opened the letter.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for writing. I haven't heard from you in a while. Congratulations on your girlfriend. I have some news: I too have a girlfriend. Now, I know you think I'm ancient--

Harry smiled; he didn't think any such thing. It was the sort of thing Remus often wrote; Harry wondered whether it was because he *felt* old.

--but Selena and I are very comfortable with each other. She was a few years behind me in school, in Ravenclaw. She was bitten around five years ago. I haven't heard of it ever happening in any of the camps, but we might just request permission to marry. We probably wouldn't be able to share quarters, as they would have to lay out money to create special accommodations for us, but we'll see.

About the cloak: The last I heard of it, James told me he had given it to Albus Dumbledore for safe-keeping. I haven't heard anything about his whereabouts since I came here, but you could always see whether a post owl can locate him. It's worth a try.

Write again soon. Tell me more about your girlfriend (such as her name) next time. Give Jamie and your mum my love.

--Remus

Dumbledore! Of course! Harry remembered receiving the cloak now; in his first year in his other life, it had been one of his Christmas gifts, and the note had said that it was his father's. Dumbledore had had it since James Potter was killed. That he didn't know where Dumbledore was didn't matter; if he was alive, a post owl would find him. And maybe Harry could ask for help fixing the timeline, as well.

Jamie was sitting next to him, eating some bacon. She craned her neck and saw that the parchment was the cheap, thin stuff they let the residents of the werewolf camp use. Harry saw her looking and discreetly handed her the letter. She handed it back to him, frowning.

"Who's Dumbledore?" she asked softly, trying not to move her lips. Since lips were rather essential for saying "Dumbledore" Harry had a hard time figuring out what she was saying.

When he realized, he said out of the corner of his mouth, "Former Headmaster. Before McGonagall."

"Oh." She went on chewing.

"I'll write a letter to him later."

It was time to go down to the Quidditch pitch. Harry felt a burst of optimism and happiness move through him; he felt confident that Slytherin would do well in the match, and he had been reminded of the identity of the one person most likely to know the whereabouts of the cloak: Dumbledore. He rose and beckoned to the rest of his team; Draco stood and followed him, followed by Zabini, Nott and a seventh-year named Hamilton, who were the Chasers; at the rear were Talbert and Lukasavicz (appropriately pronounced 'Luka-savage'), a fourth year and a fifth year who were the Beaters.

As they left the Great Hall, Harry was momentarily shaken by the boos and hisses that came from the other tables; he wasn't used to this. When he'd been on the Gryffindor team, on days they played Slytherin, three out of four students were standing and cheering for him. That was no longer the case; now three out of four were booing him. It was jarring, and almost shook his confidence.

He tried to listen only to the Slytherin cheers behind him, keeping his smile plastered on his face. He'd hated being hated in his other life, and he hated it now. But at least, it had seemed that people in his other life had disliked him for a *reason* (even a bad reason). The Dursleys...that was no mystery. And then people had thought he was setting a monster on people in his second year...But to be hated just because he was a Slytherin was a new experience. It had nothing to do with who he *was*, and in fact, they didn't *care* who he was. Only *what* he was: a Slytherin.

They were in the entrance hall when they heard the tumultuous cheering behind them for the Ravenclaw team. Harry's stomach clenched, but he tried not to think about it. It's not a popularity contest, he reminded himself, it's a Quidditch match. We'll be fine, we will...

* * * * *

"How *could* you?"

"Stupidest bloody thing I've ever seen..."

"Can't you even bloody remember what *position* you're playing? You're the effing *captain*!"

"S'bad enough the rest of'em all hate Slytherins, you have to make us look *incompetent* too?"

Harry's head whirled; he'd just played his worst Quidditch game of his life, even including the time dementors made him fall from his broom. He'd

done the thing he'd feared doing when Ginny was playing Seeker for Gryffindor because Katie Bell was sick; he'd committed a Snitchnip. A Snitchnip occurred when a player other than the Seeker touched the Snitch. It was completely forbidden. But it had been *right there*, practically calling out to him, and he'd just forgotten everything else and acted instinctively...

The worst had been Draco's face afterward; he was obviously very hurt, glaring at Harry with those clear grey eyes, saying quietly, "If you don't want me to be Seeker any more, just say so."

Harry buried his face in his hands; he'd hidden behind Hagrid's old hut to wait out the rest of the day; he wished he could already transfigure himself into a griffin so he could fly over the forest, but sitting and staring at the trees was going to have to suffice for the moment. No one had come after him, not even Jamie or Draco. (He imagined that if she was going to comfort anyone at this time it would be Draco.)

When the sun was low in the sky, he finally rose and walked back to the castle. The Quidditch pitch seemed to leer at him ominously when he passed it. That's ridiculous, Harry thought. But he felt a presence. Then he remembered that he'd left his team robes in the changing rooms, and he went to retrieve them. As he entered, he felt a wave of cold slice through him, and his teeth clacked together uncontrollably. He had that ominous feeling again, and quickly collected his robes and left, carrying them over his left arm while his broom bounced on his right shoulder.

When he was back in the castle and about to go down to the dungeons, he heard a familiar voice hissing to him from the upper balcony.

"Harry!"

Harry looked up; it was Charlie. Harry's response was morose.

"What?"

But Charlie smiled in a friendly fashion and gestured to him to come upstairs. The doors to the Great Hall were closed; it sounded like the evening meal had begun, judging from the loud clatter of dishes and flatware. Even though he hadn't eaten since breakfast, Harry didn't feel particularly hungry.

He climbed the stairs and Charlie led him silently to his office. Harry sank into a comfortable armchair by the roaring fire; the days and nights were distinctly autumnal now, and he'd spent all day out of doors. The fire was quite welcome, as was the comfort of the chair. Charlie sat in the chair opposite him. He waved his wand and produced a platter of sandwiches and butterbeer. Charlie didn't speak, but took some food and a bottle of butterbeer for himself, and, suddenly finding his appetite, Harry did the

same. The corned beef was the best he could ever remember having, and the butterbeer warmed his insides wonderfully. When they were done their silent meal, Charlie banished the dirty dishes with a wave of his wand and sat back in his chair, surveying Harry thoughtfully. Harry was still too numb with shame to speak. Finally, Charlie broke the silence.

"You know, if you *had* been playing Seeker, that would have been one spectacular catch." Harry looked at him miserably, still silent. "Hey, this is Charlie Weasley saying this. I know a thing or two about playing Seeker. Can I see some appreciation?"

Harry groaned. "The trouble is, I was supposed to be playing *Keeper*, not Seeker. And you're probably the only person in the school still talking to me. I hate to think what my own dad's going to say, since he's also my head-of-house." Charlie had known for years that Snape was Harry's dad and that the Potions mistress was his mother. "I've already got my best friend thinking I think he's not worth a damn as Seeker..."

Suddenly, a tawny owl landed on the ledge outside one of Charlie's office windows. It knocked politely on the glass with its beak. Charlie strode over to the casement to open it, and the bird flew to Harry, dropping a piece of parchment in his lap and not stopping, swooping back to the window and out again. Charlie closed the window, bemused. Harry hesitated to look at the parchment; surely it was a howler or death threat from the rest of Slytherin House.

But it wasn't; it was a note from Ginny (who would probably not have sent it if she had known he was in her brother's office).

Dearest Harry,

Where have you been all day? Jamie and I have been very worried about you. As you can imagine, Draco's a bit put-out. I think he'll come round, though. Jamie got him to stop cleaning out of his trunk everything you'd ever given or lent him. I heard about that after the fact; Jamie and I met to talk near the rose gardens. I haven't mentioned this, but you were right; she and I have become good friends.

I know you must feel dreadful and want to be alone right now, but I miss you terribly. Can you meet me after dinner in the old Muggle Studies classroom? It hasn't been used in years. It's on the fourth floor around the corner from Dark Arts, third door on the right.

Love,

Ginny

Harry folded up the parchment and put it carefully in his pocket; he wanted to make certain he did not accidentally leave it in Charlie's office. "Um, Charlie, I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow..."

Charlie frowned. "So suddenly? What was that note?"

"Er, I have to, um, meet someone..."

Charlie got a knowing look on his face, and Harry wished with all his heart he could tell his teacher that it was his sister. "Oh--I see. This explains why you've stopped following Ginny around. You've found someone else. Well, Ron will be happy about that. Who is she?" Harry hesitated; he wished Charlie had said whether *he* was also happy about that.

"Well, we're not really telling people yet..."

"Oh," Charlie said, nodding and winking. "Well, your secret's safe with me. Especially since I don't know what it is." He grinned and slapped Harry on the upper arm. Harry fought the urge to rub the spot where he'd been hit. "You kids have fun now."

Harry nodded and left the office, waiting until he was about twenty feet down the corridor before he started running. When he reached the Dark Arts classroom he was starting to give out. He walked more slowly around the corner and counted off the doors to the room where he was supposed to meet Ginny.

He let himself in; she was there already, so he put a locking charm on the door. She smiled at him and ran across the room. Suddenly she was in his arms again, and he just held her and buried his face in her neck. Then he stepped back from her for a moment and looked around the room. It was like no other classroom in the castle; it had been tricked out to look like a Muggle house, but oddly, it was again Mrs. Figg's house. The layout was different, but it had the same upholstery and antimacassars and the same cat-and-cabbage smell. He remembered the tents they'd used for the World Cup; this must be some sort of wizarding pre-fabricated Muggle decor you could buy, something that would always look the same. This must be how wizards think all Muggle houses look. Since it was the same in his other life, some wizarding company must have been producing these for far more than fifteen years, he realized.

He went to the couch in the living-room area and sat down next to her. He was so glad not to be with people who were berating him and attacking him. Suddenly, the shock of his enormous blunder hit him again, and his shoulders began to shake. Without a word, she let him put his head on her lap while he cried. When he was all cried out, he must have dozed off, and when he awoke, she wasn't on the couch. She was looking through

the cupboards in the kitchen area of the classroom, reading labels on ancient, dusty boxes of pre-packaged Muggle convenience foods.

"Ginny?" he said softly. She looked up and smiled at him.

"There you are. I thought I'd let you sleep. You seemed all done in. I was just looking through this stuff. I wish Hogwarts hadn't dropped Muggle studies; I'd love to know more about how these things work." She'd taken off her robes and draped them over a chair; under them she'd been wearing a blouse and cardigan with a knee-length skirt and socks pulled up just below her knees. She looked like any Muggle schoolgirl, Harry thought; well, any Muggle schoolgirl from thirty years ago.

"Bring it here."

She returned to the couch where he'd been napping and sat down on the floor, handing him a box of spaghetti. He looked at it, then smiled at her.

"What don't you understand?"

"Well--what is it? How do you eat it?"

"It's spaghetti. That's a kind of pasta. You cook it."

"But *how*?"

"You put a few cups of water in a pot and put it on the stove to get hot. See the knobs on the front of the stove? That's how you control how hot each burner gets. Once the water is bubbling you put the spaghetti in and let it sit in the boiling water for about ten minutes. You also have to stir it or it'll be one big messy clump. While that's going on you heat some sort of sauce to put on it, usually tomato. Then you drain it, put the sauce on it, and eat it."

"How do you know that?"

He pointed to the side of the box; in large clear print, it read
Preparation: Heat 3 cups water to a boil...

"Oh."

He smiled at her. "Don't you ever eat anything like this at your house?"

She sighed. "If it's not a food that originated in the British Isles, no." She brushed his hair back from his forehead with her hand. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much." He put his hand to her cheek and she put her hand over his.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?" he said, gazing adoringly at her.

"Do you--do you hate kissing me?"

He frowned. "What?"

"Well--it's just that the last few weeks, whenever we're alone, it seems like you're trying very hard *not* to kiss me. You've been sort of, I don't know, chattering away like you're trying to avoid it. I didn't realize at first, but then I started looking for it, and--then it was hard to deny that was what you were doing..."

He caught his breath. "Oh, Ginny, I'm so sorry..." He wasn't sure what to say. He *had* been purposefully avoiding any extended snogging sessions, due to a combination of Hermione-guilt and Draco-guilt. Now he had a dose of Ginny-guilt to deal with as well; the girl he adored was thinking he didn't care about her any more...

"If anything," he said hoarsely, "I've been afraid that if we started, I wouldn't be able to stop..." She smiled at that; he could see that answer satisfied her, made her stop doubting herself and her attractiveness to him. Their eyes locked, and then she moved to close the distance between their mouths; Harry held the back of her head, his fingers sunk into her luxurious hair, giving up, giving in. He drank in her intoxicating breath; she always seemed to have been eating chocolate before kissing him. The pent-up desire he'd felt for her for weeks rose to the surface. He felt her hand caress the side of his face, then come to rest at the base of his throat. She was still kneeling on the floor while he was on the couch, prone. Although he kept his eyes closed, concentrating on kissing her, he was aware of her fingers unbuttoning his robes, then his shirt. Then nothing more seemed to be happening other than the prolonged kiss, so Harry opened his eyes a sliver and saw that while they'd continued to kiss, she'd been busy removing her cardigan and untucking her blouse from her skirt.

His blood felt like it was boiling in his veins; he grasped her head more firmly and opened his mouth wider; she followed his lead, then climbed onto the couch, kneeling above him. He broke the kiss and moved his lips down her throat, nipping gently at the base, making her gasp in surprise. Then it was his turn to gasp when she moved her mouth down his neck and onto his bared chest, her fingers fluttering across his skin making him flinch involuntarily; he watched the top of her head in fascination as she pushed his shirt out of the way, then drew his breath in sharply when he felt her place her mouth over his right nipple. His head was whirling; when they'd kissed and touched previously, doing it out-of-doors had meant, of necessity, keeping their clothes on. Suddenly there was so much

happening, and so fast; after resisting this for four weeks, it was still hard for him to believe that Ginny wanted to kiss and touch him now.

She was moving her mouth down his belly, and now he thought he was going to go insane; he gently lifted her head from his body with a shiver. He turned on his side and drew her up beside him, guiding her until she was looking up at him, while he pressed himself against the back of the couch. He lowered his mouth to hers again, feeling her hand on his chest, a touch that burned. He knew that they couldn't keep this up much longer. He couldn't keep it up much longer, not if he didn't want to lose his mind. Now the problem wasn't Hermione-guilt or Draco-guilt. He didn't want to pressure her in any way; she wasn't ready yet for more than kissing, and he wanted to respect that, no matter how agitated she made him...

He was just getting ready to tell her they should stop when he felt her take his left hand and guide it under her shirt, then up to her chest, where she placed it over one of her satiny bra cups...

"Ginny!" he exclaimed, hastily removing his hand and trying to sit up. But there wasn't room for that, so instead he succeeded in knocking her onto the floor, where she landed with a thud.

"Ow! What did you do that for?"

This was getting to be much more complicated than he'd expected. He hadn't counted on things moving along so swiftly. *It was a good thing I was holding back for the last month...* He helped her stand, then started buttoning his shirt while apologizing. "Sorry. I just think it's, um, rather late. Isn't it? Do you have a watch? How long was I sleeping?"

She was smoothing her hair. "I don't know. I don't have a watch. Perhaps you're right." She started tucking her blouse into her skirt again, then retrieved her cardigan. "It does seem like we've been up here for a while..."

When he'd buttoned his robes again and she'd done the same with hers, she put her arms around his neck. "It's just as well that one of us has some self-control, Mr. Potter. Should I feel insulted?" she grinned at him. He pulled her to him.

"You should feel shocked, I think," he said softly against her cheek, then moved his mouth to her ear, breathing in it gently, and she sighed and collapsed weakly against him. He pulled back from her again, smiling.

"You're just playing with me now," she accused him, breathing shallowly, one hand on his arm to stay upright. Then she cleared her throat. "You'd better walk me to my common room now, before I drag you back to that couch..."

He grinned. "If you insist..."

They walked down stairs and through corridors with their arms around each other; it was unlikely they'd run into anyone this late. When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady in the pink dress which hid the entrance to the Gryffindor common room, Harry looked down at her and she gazed up at him with large eyes that seemed to engulf him in darkness and want. He leaned over her and she responded immediately, arms twining around him, and this time they were both shaking when they simultaneously broke the kiss.

"Goodnight," she said, her voice quivering.

"Goodnight," he answered, feeling a hollowness inside him as he watched her give the password and climb in through the portrait hole. *He could not enter. He was an outsider.* He would be lying if he had said that he was enjoying being a Slytherin, that it was every bit as good as being a Gryffindor, even though (until today) he'd managed to put up with it well enough. Suddenly, seeing her disappear into Gryffindor Tower, he felt an acute pain inside that could not be ignored. *He was no longer a Gryffindor.* He swallowed, trying not to cry. Not a Gryffindor. He, who had wielded the sword of Godric Gryffindor and used it to slay the King of Snakes, to save Ginny's life...

Now his sorrow was not so much in leaving Ginny, but in being cut off so completely from the world he had known since his first year. He felt unshed tears in his eyes; he blinked, trying to keep them from spilling over his cheeks, and turned to go down the numerous staircases that would eventually lead to the dungeons, and eventually, to Slytherin House.

But when he turned, he discovered that he wasn't alone in the corridor, and he stopped abruptly, his jaw dropped, because he hadn't heard a sound; indeed, a bright, flaming torch high on the wall should have thrown the man's shadow onto the floor where Harry would have seen it, and he hadn't noticed anything a moment before he'd turned except his own shadow.

It was the caretaker; Harry couldn't remember his name. The same could not be said of the caretaker. He nodded at Harry. "Potter, isn't it? Out after hours. You know what that means." His voice was surprisingly laconic. He was a little shorter than Harry, although he was stooped with age, so he might have been rather tall at one time. His hair was white, brushed back from a bald spot and neatly trimmed above the collar of the shirt he wore under mud-colored, shabby robes. He squinted, as though he should wear glasses and was too vain, and his large nose was generously veined above a scraggly beard and mustache.

"I'm sorry, er--"

"Davy. You should probably be tucked up in your bed if you can't remember that. Unfortunately, we have to go to my office first to write up the paperwork for your detention. Come on..."

Harry followed gladly, but tried not to look it; he'd neglected this during the last month, after the time he'd gone to talk to Jamie and ran into Mariah. Of course, he didn't have a handy accomplice this time to create a diversion, but maybe he could improvise on that. Before they'd left the area outside the Gryffindor common room, he said, "Um, she's not going to get a detention too, I hope?"

"She who? Is there someone else I should know about?" Maybe he hadn't seen Ginny.

"Er, no, no one at all..."

After descending staircase after staircase, they came at last to the caretaker's office. The old man leaned very close to the door to give the password, but Harry managed to catch it anyway.

"Treacle fudge."

It was as cramped and depressing as Harry remembered it. And there were the files in the corner behind Davy's desk, the files where the Marauder's Map might still be lurking. Davy waved his hand at a chair in front of the desk, going round to sit behind it. He took out his wand and Harry braced himself; was he going to be subjected to some kind of transfiguration for punishment? Was he going to be made into a bouncing ferret? But there appeared in the air above the desk a tea tray, complete with shortbread on small red and white plates with pictures of a castle on them. The matching teapot had steam emerging from the spout, and the teacups and saucers were of the same pattern. The tea tray landed gently on the desk.

"Would you like to be mother?" the old wizard asked Harry gently. Harry didn't know what to think. This was very, very different from being dragged into this office by Filch. Of course, Davy couldn't be a Squib (since all the Squibs had mysteriously disappeared) so he didn't have that particular bitterness eating away at him. He simply seemed to be an old man who was passing the twilight of his life as the Hogwarts caretaker. He noticed now that Davy seemed to be exceptionally old, probably the oldest wizard Harry had ever seen; the network of lines on his face was very complicated, resembling fissured tree bark.

Harry nodded and carefully poured two cups of tea, passing one to Davy. They each used the cream and sugar, and Davy placed some shortbread on a plate for Harry but took none himself. They did not talk, but silently drank their tea, and Harry hungrily ate his shortbread; it seemed a very

long time since he'd had the sandwich and butterbeer in Charlie's office. How late was it? He really needed to get a watch...

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a parchment appeared on Davy's desk; it seemed to be some sort of form, which Davy was now filling out with a self-inking quill, his tongue between his teeth as he wrote, whispering the things he was writing under his breath.

"Name: *Harry Potter*. Year: *Sixth*. House: *Slytherin*. Offense: *Out of house after hours...*"

Harry chewed slowly, watching the calm, methodical caretaker fill in the detention form. How could he stage some sort of diversion? How could he get into those files? He could see that one of the cabinets was labeled *Current Students* and one was labeled *Former Students*. He needed to get into the records for the former students; that was where the map would be, if it was still here at all. But how to do it...

Suddenly, like an answer to his prayers, a loud explosion was heard in the corridor. Davy's head jerked up, and Harry shrank back in his chair; the alert expression that appeared on Davy's face and in his steely blue eyes was so abrupt that he looked possessed. He pulled out his wand and rose purposefully.

"Excuse me, Potter. Duty calls."

Harry nodded, watching him in awe; he wondered what jobs he'd had when he was younger. Maybe he'd been an Auror. Perhaps that was how he'd managed to sneak up on Harry in the upstairs corridor without Harry noticing him at all.

The second he'd left the office, Harry was on his feet; he peered around the doorjamb, seeing Davy stride down the corridor in the direction from which they'd come, then turn a corner. Harry dashed to the files for the former students and pulled open the top drawer; he quickly found the file labeled *Black, Sirius* and muttered, "Blimey," under his breath when he saw how large it was. He quickly scanned through Sirius' file; no blank parchment. He closed that drawer and opened the next one, which began with *Inverness, Gavin*. In the middle of this one he found the file for *Lupin, Remus*, which was only about half the size of Sirius'. Still no parchment. He went to the last file in the drawer; it ended with *O'Neal, Blanche*, so he closed that drawer and tried the next one. Near the front of the third drawer he found *Pettigrew, Peter*, which was ironically smaller than Remus', he noticed. No parchment. He rifled through some more *P* files before coming to *Potter, James*. It was almost as large as Sirius' file. Harry had a lot to look through, and he hoped that Davy would stay away a little longer...

When it seemed like he'd flipped past the fiftieth detention form (his father had become Head Boy *how?*) he finally came to a brittle, folded-up parchment. Harry's heart thudded painfully in his chest. He unfolded it; it was blank on both sides. He tried not to grin crazily, so Davy wouldn't wonder what he was up to when he returned. He quickly closed the drawer and folded up the parchment, putting it deep into his robe pocket. He threw himself into his chair again just as Davy turned the knob and returned to his office. Harry turned to look at him, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Whoever it was, they was too fast for old Davy. Anyway..." He went round the desk and picked up the detention form, holding it up to his face very closely, again making Harry think he needed glasses. "I think," he said in that laconic voice again, "that we'll just call it a night, Potter." And with that, he carefully ripped the parchment in half, tossed the pieces in the air, and they promptly disappeared from sight. Not a scrap, not a speck was left.

Harry swallowed. "Oh. Well, okay. If you're sure."

Davy nodded at him. "Let me walk you back to your house so's you don't meet up with whoever this other mischief-maker is. Obviously there's someone out there tonight making far more trouble than you, and it's my job to catch'em."

Harry nodded and followed the caretaker out of his office. As they walked the long distance to Slytherin House, Davy engaged him in conversation, asking slow, carefully-worded questions about where he lived during the summer, what classes did he like best, who were his friends. When they reached the entrance to the Slytherin common room, Harry suddenly realized that he'd told this unassuming man many things he probably wouldn't even tell Jamie or Draco, although at the time, he hadn't felt like he was being pumped for information. He's good, Harry realized. He's very good.

After Harry gave the password ("bloodwort") Davy nodded at him and said, "Now you come round to my office some time when you haven't broken the rules and we'll have tea again, all right? I'll do proper scones and clotted cream."

Harry gave him a reserved smile. "I'll do that."

The caretaker left and Harry entered the common room, closing the wall behind him. When he reached the sixth-year dorm, he crept in carefully, so as not to wake his roommates. But one of them hadn't gone to sleep at all.

"Harry! Where've you been?" Draco was sitting up in bed, hugging his knees to his chest. Harry shushed him and gestured for him to follow him back to the common room so they could talk.

"What time is it?" he asked Draco first.

"One-thirty."

"Really? Wow. I had no idea. No wonder Davy took me to his office. But look what I found there..."

He took out the parchment and unfolded it. He placed it on a table, holding down the edges with his fingers. Draco frowned.

"How do you know this is really it?"

"I don't. But it was the only blank parchment in my father's old file, so there's only one way to find out." He took out his wand and waved it over the parchment. "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*"

Suddenly, on the clear surface of the parchment, lines began to appear; they ran up and down and sideways, they raced to the edges and intersected in seemingly endless permutations until the plans for all of the floors of the castle were displayed, as well as the grounds up to the Forbidden Forest. Harry looked at Draco and grinned. There seemed to be some small dots moving about the castle, but Harry didn't bother looking at them. They were in for the night; anyone else wandering about was Davy's concern. He waved his wand over it again, saying, "*Mischief managed.*"

He folded it and put it back into his pocket, trying not to laugh at Draco's expression. "Harry! I didn't realize--that is one hell of a map! Do you know what we could *do* with a map like that?"

"I know what I'm *going* to do; I'm going to leave the school to find the Muggle-born witches and wizards I told you about."

"But Harry--"

"But nothing. It's not a toy. We have important things to do. And now it's late; I really need some sleep. I had a nap earlier, but it wasn't really enough..."

"You never said where you were."

"I was--with Ginny. That's all you need to know."

Draco's eyebrows flew up. "*Really.* With Ginny. Hmmm. Have we solved our little virginity problem...?"

"Our? The last time you were a virgin even in *thought* was when you were about eleven. And none of your business."

"Oh. I'll take that as a no."

"I *said*..."

"Oh, come on, you'd be bouncing off the walls if you'd just come from shagging her. I should have realized you hadn't."

Harry sighed; Draco had a one-track mind. "Anyway, we should get to bed. And Draco--"

"What?"

Harry hesitated. "I'm sorry. About the match. I can't believe how stupid--"

Draco held up his hand. "Don't. I'm your friend. We're fine. But you owe me. I spent all afternoon and evening defending you to every prat in Slytherin. So did Jamie. Your slimy little brothers, on the other hand, were suggesting various curses we could put on your bed, your clothes... You probably did the right thing to duck out until now. You're lucky you didn't get hexed into the middle of next week. These *are* Slytherins we're talking about. Since it's pretty late, are you still planning to get up early and go running?"

"I suppose so, since I did have that nap."

"Good; maybe by the time they see you at breakfast they'll be over it. Then again, some of them are really good at letting things fester for a while, so watch your back for the next, oh, six months, okay?"

Harry tried not to laugh; six months. No problem. "Okay," he said, smiling at his friend, who'd been defending him all afternoon and evening, when he was probably every bit as hacked off at Harry as the others were.

They returned to their dorm and Harry undressed and climbed into bed. When he was almost dozing off, he called across the room, "Draco?"

"Mmm?"

"Thanks. And I really am sorry."

"You're welcome. I know you are. But Harry?"

"What?"

"The next time you touch the Snitch before me, I get to kill you. Got that?"

Harry smiled in the dark.

"Got it."

* * * *

Now that Jamie and Draco knew about Ginny, it was time for Ginny to know about his "revolutionary" plans. After Sunday morning breakfast, the four of them waited for everyone else to leave the Great Hall before going into the anteroom and locking the door.

He told Ginny what he'd told his sister and best friend, and showed the Marauder's Map to the girls, who were oohing and aahing over it before he put it away again. When he told Ginny about trying to find Muggle born witches and wizards, he wasn't prepared for her reaction at all. She threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly. Jamie and Draco pretended to look away.

"What was that for?"

She grinned at him. "That is for having a brave, selfless boyfriend." Harry flushed; if only she knew how very selfish he was capable of being...

"Well, there's something else you should know..." and he told her about the very great likelihood that he and Draco would eventually be initiated as Death Eaters. This time she put her hand over her mouth and there were tears in her eyes. Harry came and crouched by her chair. "We don't want to do this," he whispered. "And if they force us...we'll be spies. Just pretend to be good little Death Eaters. I can't bear the thought of pledging loyalty to the monster that killed my father, but I'll gladly pretend if I can bring him down by doing so."

She listened to him; she had to put her head very close to his to hear him; she was crying again. "Will you help me?" he asked her softly. She nodded through her tears and slid off the chair into his lap on the floor, and he held her while she cried and he smoothed her hair and felt her heart beat against his.

He still needed to write the letter to Dumbledore, so Jamie and Ginny went to the owlery, where they would meet Harry and Draco, who went back to Slytherin house so Harry could write the letter.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Harry wrote. Then he crumpled this up into a ball, took out a fresh piece of parchment and began again.

Dear Mr. Dumbledore,

My father was James Potter. An old friend of his has suggested that you might be in possession of something that belonged to him, something he entrusted to you before he died. It is an Invisibility Cloak. If you could please send this to me, I would appreciate it. Thank you for keeping it safe all this time.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

He folded this up carefully and sealed it with green wax kept in the Slytherin common room, pressing a snake into the soft wax with the little seal kept on the common room mantel. He wrote *Albus Dumbledore* on the front before they went up to the owlery. He tied it to the leg of one of the school owls, and after the owl left, the four of them stood leaning against the walls, staring at each other. Jamie finally broke the silence.

"What do we do now?"

Harry sighed, looking at the empty sky where the owl had been.

"Now we wait."

* * * * *

And wait they did. For three more weeks, Harry continued to live his new life, went to class, withstood his mother's scorn, enjoyed Charlie's and Sirius' classes, ran and exercised and trained to be an Animagus; he met Ginny in the Muggle Studies classroom every Friday after lunch, since that was the only free period they had in common (he still reigned himself in, but not so much that she would doubt his feelings for her), and he returned to practicing with the Quidditch team after he'd given profuse apologies to each player individually.

Still, he received no answer from Dumbledore. Was he even alive? Was he halfway across the world? As Halloween approached, Harry grew restless. Finally, he decided he had to act without the cloak.

On the last Sunday of the month, he met with Ginny, Draco and Jamie in the anteroom off the Great Hall after lunch.

"So," Draco started off. "Now that we have the map, why can't we get moving on some of this? Why do we absolutely have to have that cloak?"

Harry sighed; he would probably just have to do without the cloak. "I guess. That would mean the next thing we need is floo powder."

Ginny frowned. "Where will you get it?"

"From Mum's office," Jamie said nonchalantly; she was as glad as Harry to be able to be open about her mother's identity; Harry sometimes wondered uneasily whether Ginny and his sister discussed what he and Ginny did in private...

Harry said, "The question is *how*?"

So they worked out their plan and decided to execute it straightaway. He and Jamie knew their mother would be in her office grading papers; it would be Ginny's job to distract her and call her into the potions classroom to help her with a fever-reducing decoction while Jamie and Draco went down the hidden stairs (Harry discovered they were still there) and through the pivoting bookcase into Professor Evans' study. Harry was to guard the upper entrance.

It went off without a hitch. But Harry didn't realize that at first; it took Draco and Jamie a long time to return to the top of the stairs, so he lit his wand and carefully descended the steep stone stairs, then moved slowly along the passage, since his wandlight didn't reach very far in the dark. As he drew closer to the secret entrance to his mother's office, he saw why they hadn't returned.

Draco and his sister had their arms around each other. They were kissing, but as Harry approached them, their mouths separated. Then he realized that that wasn't because they'd noticed his advent, as he'd thought; it was so Draco could move his mouth to her ear, then down her throat...

"Ahem!" Harry said testily. "Do you mind getting your hands and mouth off my sister?" Something about this felt very familiar.

They leapt apart. "Um," Draco started to say. Jamie echoed him. Harry shushed them both.

"We have to get out of here. No more of that."

He surveyed them now, they were back in the anteroom, sitting next to each other on the table which Liam Quirke used as a desk when he ran the prefects' meetings. They were trying to pretend they weren't sneaking looks at each other. To his extreme annoyance, Ginny seemed to think it was cute.

"Do you have the money?" Draco withdrew a deep green velvet drawstring bag that clinked; he opened it and dropped ten gold Galleons into his palm, then put them back into the bag. "That should be more than enough, even after the Goblins take their cut for converting it to Muggle money. Okay. It's settled; I'm going Tuesday after Ancient Runes."

Ginny looked unsure. "Harry--are you sure you don't want to wait until Friday? We both have the same free period. I could go with you."

"No. I have a class after that. Tuesday is the only free period I have that comes at the end of the day. You'd be missing a class; we can't have anyone wondering where you are. I'll be fine." He didn't say that he didn't want her to come because she didn't know anything about the Muggle world and he did; as far as the three of them knew, he was as ignorant about Muggle London as they were.

"What are you going to do, though? How are you going to find these people?"

"I'll go someplace where I can find phone books. A library, maybe. And I'll have plenty of money for taxis or the Underground or if I have to buy a snack. I'll be fine." But he sounded more confident than he felt. He avoided mentioning Hermione's name to any of them; he felt almost like he'd be cheating on Ginny to go looking for Hermione, but that was ridiculous. He'd had a relationship with her in his other life, sure, but he'd decided now that that was a mistake and he wanted to be with Ginny (although, in his other life, that would still constitute a problem because of her relationship with Draco Malfoy). Besides, if he managed to find the Hermione that lived in this world, she wouldn't exactly be ripping his clothes off the moment she met him. They'd never even met. And somehow, he would have to convince her that *she* was a witch and that *he* wasn't insane.

Harry was anxious all day Tuesday; he kept making mistakes in Herbology that were causing Professor Sprout to tut-tut over him, and Binns' class never seem to take so long. He could barely force any food into himself at lunch, and then Ancient Runes with Wimble seemed twice as long as usual. Finally, he met up with Draco as he was running out of Arithmancy, which he had at the same time Harry had Ancient Runes; it was the only difference in their schedules.

"Ready?" Draco asked him. Harry nodded, walking with a studied nonchalance, hoping no one would take any notice of how flushed he was. Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnigan had been giving him funny looks all through Wimble's class, and he was afraid they knew something was afoot. But they reached the fourth-floor corridor mirror without anyone else following them. Harry withdrew the map from his pocket and handed it to Draco.

"Remember: starting at six o'clock, begin monitoring the map. When you see my name appear in the passage, get up here and make sure no one else is in the corridor. We can't afford to have anyone see me come out from behind the mirror."

Draco nodded, tucking the map into his pocket. He looked up and down the corridor while Harry eased open the mirror and stepped into a dusty passage. He turned to his best friend.

"Bye. Oh, and another thing: keep your hands off my sister while I'm gone. We have to talk about that..."

"All right, all right, just go!" Draco hissed. "I think I hear someone coming!"

Harry rushed into the passage and felt Draco push the mirror closed. He lit his wand and stood behind the mirror, listening.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" said a familiar voice. Harry was sure it was Ron.

"Enjoying the fact that mirrors aren't scared shitless of me, a problem that probably accounts for why you never look in one, eh Weasley?"

Harry tried not to laugh; Draco always could come up with the good lines. Then he heard Ron again.

"What's with this mirror? You must be here for a reason..."

"Maybe it's a meeting of the Draco Malfoy Appreciation Society; he needs to use a mirror so he can have a quorum of *two*." That was Neville Longbottom's voice; Harry was still getting used to the confidence he heard there. Right now Neville was being bitingly sarcastic, something he'd never done in Harry's old life.

Ron and another person laughed; that was probably Seamus. Suddenly Harry jumped; a fifth voice, loud and crisp, now addressed the four boys on the other side of the mirror.

"*Kindly* keep your fingers *off* me, if you *don't* mind!" Harry was put in mind of a very strict matron in a hospital ward. It was the voice of the mirror. "And make sure you clean your nasty little fingerprints off before you go. I'm not self-cleaning you know."

Now he heard Draco chuckling again. He heard Ron mumble, "Sorry," and then a cleaning charm. Finally, when he heard the voices moving away from the mirror he dared to turn and proceed down the passage.

It took him a good hour to reach the Hogsmeade village hall. At the end of the passage there was a rod hanging across the width of it, about five feet. Old robes were hanging on this rod on hangers. Harry ducked under the rod and pushed through the robes, finding a door. Opening it, he found himself, as he knew he would, backstage in the village hall. No one came here on Tuesday afternoons; most weddings and concerts were held

on the weekend, and amateur theatrics by various residents of the village were on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday evenings. Harry closed the door of the costume closet and looked around the dark, dusty room. He lit a fire in the fireplace and pulled the envelope with the floo powder out of his pocket. Selecting a pinch of it and putting the rest away, he threw the powder into the fire and said, "Diagon Alley!"

He stepped into the flames, which now felt like a pleasant breeze; the fireplaces and grates whirled around him; he remembered to hold his elbows in and also to hold his glasses firmly to his face. Just when he thought he was going to spew his lunch, he tumbled out into the dark front room of the Leaky Cauldron, the wizarding pub that hid the gateway to Diagon Alley. No one was in the pub in the middle of the afternoon; Tom, the publican, wasn't looking at him; Harry turned away from him hastily and took his glasses off; he brushed his hair onto his forehead, then, with a great deal of concentration, he caused his facial hair to grow using his Animagus skills, so that he now had a rather full beard and mustache. He turned to Tom again, his glasses shoved into his pocket. The publican looked at him now, and although he appeared rather blurry to Harry, he thought he saw surprise on Tom's face.

"Is there summat I can do for ye?" he asked slowly. Harry shook his head.

"Nowt, tanks. I'm headin' ter Gringotts." He didn't know why, but he suddenly had an urge to use an accent to further disguise himself. The trouble was, he had sort of mixed an Irish brogue with a Scottish burr, with a bit of Dorset for good measure. He should have thought of this ahead of time...

He strode through the pub; he'd worn some old dress robes instead of school robes, so he wouldn't automatically be branded as a Hogwarts student. He reached Gringotts without being stopped by anyone and walked to the first free Goblin and put Draco's velvet bag on the counter with a clatter.

"I need this changed into Muggle money."

The Goblin's eyes lit up; that's what they liked to hear. Reasons for surcharges.

Harry left with forty pounds in tens, fives and ones. They'd taken an appalling two *Galleons* for the surcharge. He was certain the Goblin had made it up on the spot, because he could tell that Harry was anxious to get away.

He returned to the Leaky Cauldron; Tom was still the only person in the front room. Harry removed his robes near the door and transfigured them to the half the size of his hand, then put them in his shirt pocket. He

noticed that Tom never took his eyes from him. With a small nod to the publican, Harry opened the door of the pub and stepped outside.

He was finally in Muggle London, ready to search for Hermione Granger.

Chapter Seven

From the New World

Harry squinted in the sunshine; it was uncharacteristically clear for a late-October day in London. He started walking away from the Leaky Cauldron and had a bit of a shock when he caught sight of himself in a shop window. The beard was fuller than he'd intended to make it; he looked as if he'd been living in the wilderness for years, with no way to shave. He'd use his wand to trim it later. He hated to use his Animagus skills to put the facial hair back into his follicles; somehow he always wound up with at least one painful ingrown hair. The wand did a cleaner job of it.

He decided that his white shirt looked clean enough, though, and was reasonably unwrinkled. His black jeans were discreet, and the long, slim pocket below his right knee which held his wand was very subtle and well-camouflaged. He almost didn't recognize himself; hopefully no one else would recognize him either.

He walked to the same tube station to which Hagrid had taken him after doing his school shopping when he was eleven. He boarded a train for the King's Cross/St. Pancras station. This was a part of the plan he was especially proud of, but he could not tell Ginny, Draco or Jamie about it. He had remembered that whenever the Dursleys took him to or from King's Cross, they passed the British Library. It was right across the road, a huge brick pile, which now represented to Harry a huge brick pile of information. He couldn't tell the others how it had occurred to him to go to the British Library, because in this life he'd never had to take the Hogwarts Express from London to Hogsmeade. But he was very pleased with himself nonetheless.

He came up from the station and stopped, nearly getting trampled by the people behind him who were not expecting him to suddenly stand where they wished to walk. Then he couldn't resist it; he walked not toward the library, but King's Cross station. He entered the station and proceeded to Platform Nine, finally stopping in the very spot where Voldemort had tossed him the clock Portkey. If only he'd dropped it and run through the barrier to Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters! If only he hadn't given in to temptation and decided to save his mother's life...He closed his eyes and wished that he had that moment back again, just as he had wished so many times that he could do over the end of the Triwizard Tournament, so he could be selfish and claim the cup for himself, sparing Cedric.

But then he thought of Jamie. No, he had to admit; it hadn't *just* been the prospect of saving his mother. The idea of having a sister, too, had somehow overwhelmed him and pushed him over the edge. (Of course, it hadn't helped that he'd had almost no sleep all summer.) He shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't think of Jamie right now. He loved her, but he couldn't dwell on what would happen if he managed to fix it all. He couldn't let squeamishness stop him from doing what was right.

He finally crossed the road and climbed the steps of the library. When he entered the large entrance hall, he saw a desk labeled *INFORMATION* which was staffed by a very blonde girl with very not-blonde roots who was probably a university student; she didn't look a day over twenty, at any rate. He walked over to her swiftly, trying not to blink as her face grew more and more distinct. It was very disorienting to be going about without his glasses. He cleared his throat before he spoke in order to get her attention.

"Excuse me, miss, could you tell me which room I should go to in order to find out-"

"The British Library at St. Pancras is a research library, not a public reference library," the girl informed him in a monotone. Her nose was buried in a thick book. She did not appear to care who he was or why he was there; she continued with her recitation. "Admission to the Library cannot be guaranteed. Access to the reading rooms is provided to those who have reached a point in their research where no other library can adequately supply all the information required, or who can demonstrate a legitimate need to use items in the collection to further their research. Admission to the Reading Rooms is by Reader's Pass, obtainable from Reader Admissions."

Harry wasn't completely convinced she was human; surely she was some mechanized creation that the British government had bought from Disney? She continued reading her book, while Harry stood shifting from foot to foot, uncertain of how to proceed. He felt so stupid; he'd thought the name "British Library" had meant that it was a public reference library. He didn't know of any other London libraries offhand; he knew where to find the small library in Little Whinging, but he didn't want to spend more time or his meager budget to travel there (and he didn't want to risk encountering any of the Dursleys; in his other life, his aunt did volunteer work at the library, as it helped her pursue her chief hobby of being village gossip).

Harry took a deep breath and tried again. "In that case, can you tell me-"

"Postgraduate students and academic staff," she intoned, "are given a five year pass if they can produce one of the following: a letter from their institution, on headed paper from someone in a position of authority, signed and dated. This should confirm the name of the applicant..."

Harry was getting frustrated enough that he was worried about performing some accidental magic that would require the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to show up. Just what I need, he thought, trying to count under his breath to calm himself.

"...status and level of the course studied, and an outline of the reasons for needing to use the Library; a faculty/staff card, or contract; a postgraduate student card, an acceptance letter or a registration form which clearly states the level of the course."

"But miss," Harry tried to interject, "all I wanted was-"

"Students at undergraduate level should normally have tried their college or other academic and local libraries before coming to the British Library. The Library does not hold multiple copies of standard textbooks, and cannot normally support the research needs of those in the early years of a course."

She was suddenly quiet, and Harry heaved a sigh of relief. "That's all very interesting," he lied, "but what I really-"

"Students in their final year," she resumed speaking after turning the page of the text she'd been reading, "who are preparing a dissertation may be issued with a one year pass if they cannot get the material they want in their college or other libraries and can produce a letter of recommendation from the course tutor or college librarian signed and dated. This should confirm the name of the course and give a list of specific items required or a description of the need to use the Library, and state other libraries that have been used. If the student cannot produce this recommendation the Reader Admissions Office will discuss their research needs with them and may issue a one year pass if there is clear evidence of need to use the collection and the student can produce a student card indicating the course studied and the year of the course and titles of particular items that have been identified in the British Library cata- "

"Will you bloody well *shut up?*" Harry yelled at her. His voice echoed around the cavernous space and he looked about; the dozen or so people present gave him surprised looks, and he saw that the so-called *INFORMATION* girl had even deigned to notice he existed now. In fact, she was very, very aware that he existed now. Since his face was mostly obscured by his beard, he could only conclude that she must be very fond of dark, full beards. Or perhaps green eyes. At any rate, he was very disconcerted now by the way she was looking at him (he could recognize *that* sort of look at short range even without his glasses) and he was simultaneously wishing he'd said "ruddy" instead of "bloody" since he was getting very, very annoyed looks from some extremely prim-looking women in their fifties who were probably quite formidable university professors. He swallowed; so much for keeping a low profile.

"I, um, was just trying to find a phone book. I need to look up someone's address. If you could just tell me where the nearest public library is-"

"I have phone books," she said eagerly, fumbling underneath the counter; after a few moments of grunting, she pulled out a thick, well-thumbed phone directory; Harry couldn't see what area it covered because the cover was missing. "Where does the person live?" she asked helpfully, in a pert, animated voice. The difference between her current demeanor and her earlier one was like night and day.

"Um, I'm not sure...her parents are both dentists. And I'm not even sure what their first names are..."

"Well, we can just try all of the books," she said brightly; Harry now got the impression that she was trying to prolong her encounter with him. "What's the last name?"

"Granger," he said, then spelled it. "Let me think; maybe Hermione *did* say what her parents' names are..."

"*What* did you say?"

"I said Granger. G-R-A- "

"No, what did you say her first name was?"

"Hermione. But I doubt she'd be listed on her own..."

The girl had stopped looking through the phone book and now stared at Harry as though he were as mentally deficient as he thought he was. "Hermione Granger? *That's* who you're looking for? In the phone book?" Her tone of voice indicated that this was patently ridiculous.

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Yes. I'm sorry to bother you. I should go. If you can just tell me where there's a nearby public li-"

She reached across the counter and grabbed his shoulders, then turned him so he was facing a stiff sign sitting on an easel; he couldn't make out any of the words on the sign, which was about fifteen feet away, so he pulled his glasses out of his shirt pocket, giving up on the idea of disguising himself by not wearing them. The second his glasses were back on his face, the words came into focus for him.

Appearing Today Tuesday, October 29, 1996 At the British Library

HERMIONE GRANGER
Cellist

Playing the Bach Unaccompanied Cello Suites, 1, 4 and 5

In the Auditorium 14.10-15.00

Harry's mind went blank; he couldn't think. *She was here!* She was here and he'd almost left, thinking he was the biggest fool in the world not to know that the British Library didn't let just anybody in...If he'd only had his glasses on, he would have noticed the sign as soon as he'd walked in the door. He resolved to only take his glasses off to sleep in future.

He turned to the girl excitedly. "What time is it?"

She checked her watch. "Two-thirty."

Harry's heart was beating painfully in his chest. "How much is it?"

"It's free. But the concert's already started."

Harry turned to her desperately. "Please! I've come a long way to find her-"

The girl grimaced; Harry thought she looked like she wished a boy would travel a long way to look for *her*. Finally, she relented; "All right-but be quiet when you go in..."

She gave him directions to the auditorium, and he tried to walk there both as quickly and as discreetly (trying to make it look like he *wasn't* hurrying) as possible. He opened one of the double doors just enough to slip in, but he was still met by hostile glares from people seated in the back row. Trying to look contrite and apologetic, Harry picked up a concert program and slipped unobtrusively into a seat on the aisle in the back row, next to one of the glarers. Harry smiled feebly at the middle-aged man.

He couldn't see the stage, as there was a very tall man and a very tall woman, who seemed to be his wife, sitting directly in front of Harry. The audience was rapt, absorbing the music. She was playing very fast, it seemed to him. Harry looked at the program he'd picked up, still unable to believe he'd found her already. Then, as he read, he thought it would have been even more unlikely for him *not* to have found her, considering what she had been doing for the last few years...

Hermione Granger, cello

Hermione Granger, a native of Greenwich, England, began studying cello at the age of five. She made her solo debut in 1989 at the Southwestern Youth Music Festival in America, and in 1992, at the age of twelve, she was accepted at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, which has produced, proportionately, the largest body of notable performing musicians of any conservatory. Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Montgomery-Scott, the philanthropists, hosted Ms. Granger in

their Philadelphia home during her studies in America, as they have done for numerous other musical prodigies over the years.

In 1993, Hermione Granger performed the Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and again with the Boston Symphony Orchestra the following year. She has appeared as soloist with ensembles on both sides of the Atlantic: the Crossings Chamber Orchestra, the Essex Symphony, the Purcell Society Chamber Orchestra and the Kent Junior Youth Symphony, to name a few. In 1995, Ms. Granger performed at Carnegie Hall as a member of the New York String Orchestra. She has won numerous awards and honors, including the Gregor Piatigorsky Memorial Cello Scholarship and the John Williams Scholarship from the Young Musicians Foundation, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Bronislaw-Kaper Award, and first prize from the Kent Young Artists Competition, among others. She has won the Jacqueline du Pré Competition three years running.

During the summers, Ms. Granger has participated in the Brava School for Strings, St. Cecelia Summer String Program, Sarasota Music Festival, Music Academy of the West and the Idyllwild School of Music. Ms. Granger has returned to her native England after completing her Curtis studies earlier this year, but she will be in America again next month to perform the Dvořák cello concerto at Carnegie Hall with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. At Curtis, she studied with Daniel Clemmons, cellist of the Bernardini String Quartet, and she held the Bok Foundation Fellowship.

This program is sponsored by the Friends of the British Library Foundation.

Harry swallowed; she'd been *busy*. He was lucky he hadn't waited any longer to try to find her; soon she would be in New York, and although he felt rather clever and pleased with himself for working out a way to get to London on a Tuesday afternoon, he knew there was no way for him to get to America.

She was still playing rather fast, the notes tumbling over each other in a sort of dance. Harry found himself tapping his leg to the triplets, closing his eyes and becoming part of the onward momentum of unadorned melody. Then suddenly--it was over. She ended the sequence of triplets with an unobtrusive progression downwards in pitch, drawing the bow across a string that she probably was not even touching with her left hand, so low and mournful was the tone. It was done; no drawn-out finality, no lingering. He was not prepared for the explosion of applause that immediately followed.

He could barely glimpse the top of her head as she stood and bowed; he felt the glaring man next to him would probably do worse than glare if he stood and craned his neck to see her. All he saw was a bit of brown hair and a flash of red, for some reason. Then she was seated again, ready to begin (he checked the program) the prelude of the next piece. He saw that the last movement of the previous piece had been a *Gigue*, which explained the dancing feeling he'd had listening to it. He wished he could see her. She began playing again, drawing the bow mournfully across the strings, producing sounds too deep and full for words. He marveled when she drew two tones at once from the instrument, especially when this meant dissonances; it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He grew more and more nervous about approaching her, and about what he wanted to tell her. She had no idea she was a witch, and yet here she was, so powerful, holding all these people in her thrall.

He leaned forward and tapped the shoulder of the tall man in front of him. "Excuse me," he whispered, "could you lean to the left just a bit? I can't see."

The man turned to glare at him, and his wife hissed at Harry. "Are you another one of those young hooligans who's only here to ogle her? Music is for *listening*. If you want to gawk at someone, go elsewhere." Now she glared at her husband, not Harry, and Harry wondered whether she felt her husband was "gawking."

He furtively rose and crept closer to the front of the auditorium. The seats were almost completely filled, but he managed to find one in the middle of a row that had a coat on it. He mumbled, "Excuse me, pardon me, so sorry," to a progression of people who had to rise in their seats slightly to allow him through, giving him the evil eye the whole time, until he finally reached the seat, and then he stared at the coat on it pointedly, but the concertgoers on either side had decided to studiously ignore him and no one removed the offending coat from the seat in question.

"Sit down!" the woman behind him hissed, causing people near her to hush her with annoyance. Harry shrugged and picked up the coat and sat down, hugging it to him until the woman to his right angrily took it.

He could see Hermione quite well now, and he tried not to reveal to the people around him how shocked he was by her appearance. Hermione looked more like she was dressed for clubbing than giving a Tuesday-afternoon cello concert. She wore a tight black bustier that appeared to stop above her navel; black shorts that were very brief and tight, and sheer black tights with clunky black Doc Maartens. She cradled the cello between her legs; the tip rested not on the floor but on a small disk that was attached to the leg of her chair, like a dog on a lead. Seeing the way she held the instrument to her body, he was aware of his mouth going dry...

Her hair was done in what seemed to be a thousand tiny braids, pulled together at the nape of her neck, reminding him of the way Jamaica Thomas had worn her hair. A single lock of hair that began above the left side of her brow was not braided, hanging in a sinuous curl that lightly touched the side of her face. This long curl was dyed bright red, which matched her eyeshadow...In fact, Harry could not ever remember Hermione wearing makeup, and here she was looking as though the cosmetics display in a chemist's shop had exploded and she was unfortunately in the line of fire. He was uncertain how many holes were in each of her ears, but a parade of studs marched up the curve of each one, and a single dangling earring in her left ear had a long red feather that echoed her dangling red curl.

And then there were the matching tattoos that adorned her arms; they appeared to be some sort of red and gold creature, the image winding around her limbs. Harry was flabbergasted; he turned and looked at the concert audience, seeing an amazing number of young men who also looked like they were dressed for clubbing. It did not seem to be the usual cello concert crowd, despite the presence of some middle-aged matrons and pompous-looking pseudo-intellectuals and professorial types. Harry was not convinced that most of the young (or not-so-young) men were listening to the music; they appeared to be watching her closely.

He turned his attention back to Hermione, whose face was clouded by her fierce concentration. She frequently closed her eyes and shook her head, as though she were disagreeing with someone. Her right hand appeared to hold the bow lightly, and yet Harry had the distinct impression that if he were to try to pry it from her fingers, it would take a great deal of effort (if he succeeded at all). Her left hand danced over the strings, and Harry was glad he had his glasses on again and that he'd moved closer; he squinted now, staring at that hand. There were times when her very bones appeared to *stretch* and reach further than a normal human being's hands ought to.

He swallowed. Either his eyes were deceiving him (he wished he had a pair of omnioculars with him) or she was magically altering her body to play the cello. Was it conscious or unconscious? he wondered. And the magic she was using was--*the Animagus Transfiguration*. The same principle, anyway. She was clearly still human.

Harry watched her intently, afraid to blink in case he missed something. He hadn't realized that someone could do that. Perhaps pointing this out to her would make it easier to tell her she was a witch. She might even be aware of this ability. He was encouraged for the first time; he wasn't sure whether Hagrid had felt this way before telling him that he was a wizard, but Harry's stomach had been in turmoil since the moment he walked out of the Leaky Cauldron into Muggle London.

Harry lost track of time; he stopped mentally marking off each successive movement in the concert program, simply enjoying watching and hearing her progress through the *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, and *Gavottes*. The suite ended, like the earlier one, with a *Gigue*, which again made Harry want to get up and dance. He would probably be dancing with joy in a minute anyway, he thought, when he finally got to talk with her for the first time in this life.

Then a sudden thought made him suck in his breath; why was he so excited to see her? He tried not to picture her as she'd been in his room at the Leaky Cauldron, but it was difficult...Was he cheating on Ginny? After all, he'd slept with Hermione. Not in this life, but he had done it. Or, he wondered again, am I cheating on Hermione when I'm with Ginny? Even though he'd decided that they probably shouldn't stay together, he hadn't properly broken up with her, and here he'd been snogging Ginny.

His head was whirling. *Did* he want to break up with Hermione? Watching her now, he felt completely and utterly torn...She looked absolutely amazing, and her playing was brilliant, and--and--she looked amazing...

The notes she played rang through the room; when she played an echo at *pianissimo*, then crescendoed to a resonant *fortissimo*, Harry had to close his eyes for a second, holding his breath; her power was something he knew now he should have expected, but it was coming close to completely overwhelming his senses. She continued with the *Gigue*, alternating softer and louder passages, trilling and drawing out some notes and finally ending on a triumphant low note that almost immediately disappeared in the cacophonous applause and shouts of "*Brava! Brava! Bravissima!*"

The audience members had leapt to their feet, and Harry joined them enthusiastically, grinning and clapping, gazing at her with admiration and awe, while she stood, as regal as a queen, holding her instrument in one hand and her bow in the other, and bowed deeply; her bustier allowing the audience a view that produced even more yells and a good deal of foot-stomping; Harry wasn't so sure the crowd hadn't just come from a very lively football game.

Now that she was standing, Harry could see that her tights were torn; what looked like deliberate tears streaked down her legs, and he could see now that she had a pierced navel with a ring in it.

The acclaim continued for some time, and Harry took advantage of this to worm his way out of the row in which he was seated; he crept toward the front, still clapping like the other audience members (he was afraid that not clapping in this crowd could prove to be quite dangerous) and when it finally seemed that it was dying away, most people gathered up their belongings and began moving toward the exits. Unfortunately, Harry saw that he wasn't the only person waiting to talk to her; a crowd of eight or

nine young men ranging from the ages of fifteen to twenty-five appeared to be waiting to accost her.

She calmly ignored this fact and tenderly packed her instrument into its case, then her bow and the small disk which had been looped around her chair leg. She fastened the case, then checked the fastenings three times each. Still ignoring the crowd of admirers, she went to the wings of the stage and returned wearing what looked to Harry's eyes remarkably like a wizard's cloak; it stopped just shy of being floor-length, appeared to be made of a shining black material that shone silver where the light hit it, and it was lined with red satin, visible inside the hood. It was fastened with a silver brooch at her throat, permitting the young men to continue to get a good view of her bustier and the torn-tight-clad legs emerging from her very short shorts.

She gave the small crowd a bemused look, then said lazily, "Who wants autographs?"

That was their cue; four young men had copies of a classical music magazine with a photo of her on the cover; in this photo, she was wearing a black strapless evening gown that appeared to have two convenient slits in the front that allowed her legs to peek through (she was photographed barefoot) and which would let her properly cradle the cello; her tattoos were easily seen on her arms, and her hair cascaded onto her shoulders, the braids replaced by abundant bushy brown hair that looked like it hadn't been combed or brushed in a year; the lone lock of red hair was still in evidence amidst the brown. She held her cello in one hand and her bow in the other, and Harry thought, for some reason, that the way she was holding each item was deliberately provocative. Harry thought he saw the words, "Good To Be Bad? The Next Jacqueline du Pré," on the cover. She autographed these magazines without a second glance.

After the magazine boys had left, she was presented with copies of the program Harry had in his hand, which she also signed quickly with a flourish. They went off looking very pleased with themselves; one of them had frankly been too petrified to even tell her his name, and she simply signed his program, "Best wishes, Hermione Granger."

Finally, there was just Harry and another young man, who, now that Harry looked, was not all that young. He was at least twenty-two or twenty-three, he thought, with dark close-cropped hair he'd died lemon yellow (Harry could see the roots) and multiple facial piercings that made Harry wince, thinking of how they might have been done. His worn black leather jacket and jeans hung easily on his muscular frame, and Harry started to panic, wondering whether this was her boyfriend. How would he talk to her alone if she had a boyfriend lurking about?

She regarded him with an expression that couldn't exactly be called a smile; it was more like a grimace. "Hello, Alec," she drawled. Harry

realized suddenly what had been odd about her voice when he'd heard her speaking to the other autograph-seekers; she'd either lost her English accent in attending school in America, or she was affecting an American accent now. Whatever the reason for it, Harry frowned to hear her odd new voice. She didn't sound like the Hermione he knew at all.

Alec sidled up to the stage and put his arm on it casually. "Come on, Herm-love. Come out with me tonight. Don't tell me you don't want to; I know you do..."

She closed her eyes as if she were in pain. "Alec, we're through. I told you...And anyway, I have to--to--"

Harry could tell she was grasping at straws, wanting to avoid her old boyfriend. He stepped forward, trying to sound like someone about ten years older. "She has to do an interview with me. Already agreed." He thrust his hand out toward the leather-jacketed young man. "Harry Potter. Daily Prophet." He tried not to wince as this came out of his mouth. Damn! He should have thought of a fake name; and he shouldn't have used the name of the wizarding paper...

He looked up at her, surprised to see her looking grateful. "Yes, yes! Of course. Alec, this is Mr. Potter. He's, ah, doing a profile for their arts section. My agent set it up; you know how he is. Always with the publicity machine..."

Alec surveyed Harry critically. "I've never seen you before. What rag do you write for again?"

"Alec! Stop that! Sod off!" Now her Britishness was reasserting itself. "I'm busy!"

He started to move away reluctantly, looking enviously at Harry, who shrugged as if to say, "Hey, it's just my job." When Alec had left the auditorium, Harry pulled himself up onto the stage and stood facing her.

"Right! Thanks for going along with that. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to speak to you alone."

She gave him a look of annoyance similar to that Alec had received. "Listen, just because I took advantage of you to get rid of Alec doesn't mean I'm going to talk to you...You're not a reporter or music critic, it sounds like you made up the name of that paper, my agent would have told me if I was to do an interview afterward, and I'm tired and wanting a long, hot bath. Good bye."

She picked up her cello and turned from him. He stood rooted to where he'd been, unsure of how to turn this around; she was so authoritative he felt like he was trying to accost Professor McGonagall herself. Then he ran

and stood in her path. "Wait," he said, his voice shaking, uncertain what he was going to say. After a few seconds of indecision, he blurted out quickly, "My name really is Harry Potter. The Daily Prophet really is a newspaper, and I really have to talk to you."

She smirked. "Really? You really, really do? I mean really?"

Harry tried not to show that her mocking him was annoying; instead he decided to try a different approach. "I need to talk to you about--the Carnegie Hall incident. You know--backstage."

She blanched and he resisted the urge to leap about gleefully; he'd bluffed, and she was buying it. "How do you know about *that*?" she breathed.

He tried to shrug in what he thought was a nonchalant way. How did blackmailers speak? "I can't reveal my sources. I have no interest in this becoming public knowledge, *really* I don't," he said with a mischievous grin. "All I ask is for a little of your time."

She swallowed and looked scared, then as though she had completely changed her mind. "Why you--you filthy little *blackmailer!* I don't bloody care what you think you know; get out of my sight before I--before I--"

Harry stepped very close to her. "Yes? That's it," he said, his eyes boring into hers. "Get *really, really* hacked off at me." His voice was very soft now; in a low growl he said to her, "Look at me and think the angriest thoughts you can possibly think, go on..."

She did, standing not six inches away from him, looking like a vein was going to pop in her forehead; Harry could feel a crackling in the air. She was angry, very angry; he waited, hoping this would work...

Suddenly, he jumped; both lenses in his glasses had just shattered. The parts remained in the frames, the glass more crazed than if they'd been run over by a train. Harry took them off, grinning; he examined them. They were very thoroughly broken. He saw that Hermione was completely baffled as to why he should be smiling over this.

"You did it!" he said, laughing. "I knew you could. Or something like it. See, this is why we have to talk..."

She furrowed her brow. "What? Are you mental? You don't think--you don't think I broke your glasses, do you?" Her voice shook; Harry wondered what other types of accidental magic she performed. Alec might have been on the receiving end of some, he speculated, but if he had, it obviously hadn't put him off.

He took his wand out of its pocket, and, looking around to make certain that no one was in the room, he touched his glasses with the wand, speaking softly.

"*Reparo.* "

The glasses were good as new.

Hermione screamed.

He put his glasses back on and clamped his hand over her mouth. "Don't do that!" Her eyes were wild. "Do you promise not to scream again?"

She hesitated before she nodded, her eyes still wild. He removed his hand from her mouth. She stared at him, at his perfect glasses, at his wand. "How," she breathed, "how did you--"

"Hermione, I think you should sit."

She nodded dumbly and put her cello down, going to the chair where she'd sat playing for the better part of an hour. She swallowed and then looked up at him fearfully. He took a deep breath. "Listen," he began. "Let's start with you. You've done things like that before, haven't you? Can you tell me what sort of things?"

She frowned. After a pause, she said, "Well, when I was younger, sometimes I thought I'd imagined them, because when they happened-- yeah, I was aware of it and all--but later, it felt like a dream..."

Harry remembered that his mother had said that Muggle-born witches and wizards were still known by the Ministry, who monitored them to prevent too much accidental magic being seen. The dream effect was probably the aftermath of having a memory charm put on her.

"Well, I'm here to tell you why you can do these things. Hermione Granger--you're a witch."

She stared at him, one eyebrow raised, then rose and put her hands on her hips. "There's no need to be insulting. I'm not giving you one more second of my time." She stooped down to pick up her cello again, but Harry grabbed her shoulders.

"No, no! You don't understand! I'm not insulting you! I'm telling you you're *magical*. And now I'm not just trying to suck up. I'm magical too. You're a witch and I'm a wizard; I used my magic wand to fix my glasses after you used some accidental magic to break them. You're a Muggle-born witch."

"A whattle-born?"

"Muggle-born. Muggles are what we call non-magical people."

"We?"

"The wizarding community. We tend to hide; for a long time, it wasn't very safe to be known as a witch or wizard. That was a long time ago now, but it's become a bit of a habit...Well, that's not the only reason, of course...Now where was I?"

She looked at him with her mouth open, then recovered herself. "Oh, I don't know; you were just telling me how you're from the planet Neptune and I'm the Prime Minister of Japan."

"Hermione! I'm not nuts! I did accidental magic when I was younger too. Made my hair grow when I didn't want a haircut; found myself on the roof at school when bullies were chasing me...Surely you must remember *something*."

She started pacing back and forth, wringing her hands. After a few minutes, she began speaking softly. "It-it got worse when I went to America. I *hated* the rich snobs I had to live with. They'd hosted a girl from Korea from the ages of nine to thirteen while she studied violin at the conservatory, and a boy from Russia who was fourteen when he came and who played Lizst and Chopin and Rachmaninoff like he was channeling them...and then they got *me*.

"I was so nervous. I was three-thousand miles away from home, living with strangers, I was going to be studying with the greatest teachers in the world alongside fantastic musicians who were at least six years older than me, not to mention being at *Curtis*, and having all of these ghosts at my elbow every day..."

"When the plane landed, I was standing with this male flight attendant who thought he had to hold my hand all the time, like I was two instead of almost twelve. He was making me feel very odd and unsafe. I don't know why. I was supposed to be meeting the Montgomery-Scotts' butler. Can you believe it? Americans with a butler. Anyway, there was no butler to be found, and this attendant kept moving his hands--anyway, when I was running away from him, the last thing I remember seeing was him hopping about waving his hands, which were covered in red ants. I found a woman police officer and told her my problem, and she helped me find the butler; I've never told anyone about the flight attendant and the ants..."

"Of course, there was all of the crockery in the Montgomery-Scotts' penthouse that I caused to break. Usually when they were yelling at me for staying out late. And I knew I hadn't touched any of it. Well, I say crockery; it was really priceless Chinese antiques. God only knows how

much I cost them; their insurance rates probably skyrocketed while I was there...

"During my first year, I was in an ensemble rehearsing Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. He was working at Curtis when he wrote that, you know. And I was playing my part and the violins were picking it up, and then violas, and back to cello, then bass...trading the theme back and forth, back and forth, and all the time this tension was building and building..." She quite breathless, and Harry hadn't realized he was holding his breath as well. She sighed, as though she'd achieved an emotional release. Harry however, was still all wound up.

"And afterward, I just thought, *That's what I want to do*. To be a part of that animal that's created by all of these people playing together, each doing their part, each with a role. It's not like being part of a machine, it's more *organic* than that. I felt, oh-part of something bigger than myself. I don't think I've ever been happier in my life.

"And *then* it started to happen.

"Something in me must have triggered it. The girl next to me felt it first. She started to *float* up in the air. And then I did, and the boy next to me. Somehow my *happiness* at what I'd just been a part of...it got..I don't know, out of control. I didn't realize it was me at the time, even after the ant incident. Why would I assume it was me? When I started panicking, I suppose I wasn't so happy any more, and we all sank down into our chairs again. We all just--kind of looked at each other funny. No one said a word. I think everyone there just decided to pretend it never happened. But I *did* remember it. It was like the ant incident at the airport. I *remembered* it. Before I went to America, when anything had happened that was similar, I only recalled it vaguely afterward, it never seemed real."

Harry nodded. "Memory charms. The Ministry monitors Muggle-born witches and wizards. If they pick up on any accidental magic, they send in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, and Obliviators, too."

"Ministry? Obliviators?"

"The Ministry of Magic. The Obliviators work for the Ministry." He saw her mouth the words *Ministry of Magic* in disbelief. There was so much to explain. "The Obliviators are memory charms specialists. They put forgetting charms on Muggles who've seen magic. And on people like you, who did the magic without meaning to."

She sat again, her eyes wild. "Then--why wasn't anybody doing that when I was in America?"

Harry frowned. "I suppose--they might not have known you'd left England. There *is* a labor shortage in the wizarding world since the purges

and Hogwarts stopped taking Muggle-borns...And in America--well, they're probably still taking Muggle-born students at their wizarding schools. So no one was monitoring you."

"I didn't understand half of that, but I did understand *monitoring*. Monitoring *me*? Someone's spying on me all the time?"

"Not spying really. I'm not sure how they do it. I think they have instruments for detecting magical activity. But they also have to rely on eyewitness reports. Of course, I suppose that means changing what appeared in the papers as well as changing people's memories--they probably wouldn't want things to get that far."

She swallowed, then reached her hand out and touched his arm; Harry froze while she ran her hand down to his hand, then moved to his wand.

"Can I try it?" she whispered. "Can you explain what to do?"

Harry shivered from the feel of her hand on his wand, as though she were still touching his body. He handed it to her gently, correcting the way she was holding it.

"We could start with something simple and basic. One of the first things you learn is a levitating charm. The words are *Wingardium leviosa*. "

She repeated the words. "Nothing happened."

"Well, you didn't point the wand at anything. And more importantly, you didn't point your *mind* at anything. You have to focus on something very hard and picture it rising into the air while you're saying the spell. So, decide what you want to do and--"

"*Wingardium leviosa!* " she cried, pointing at her cello. It flew up to the very high ceiling over the stage like it had been shot out of a cannon. They heard a sickening *crunch* as it struck against the ceiling, very hard. Hermione dropped the wand with a cry; there was a horrible, stricken look on her face. Immediately, the spell was broken and the cello came crashing back down to the floor, making an even more dreadful sound when it landed. Hermione reached out her hands to it, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh! Look what you've done! Sergio Peresson made that--he's the Philadelphia instrument maker who made Jacqueline du Pré's last cello! She liked it better than her Strad! The Montgomery-Scotts asked him personally to make it after they heard me play when I was nine, and he died five years ago, I can't just get him to make me another one. They had it ready for me when I arrived to begin studying at Curtis..." She was dissolving into tears.

Harry was indignant. "What *I've* done? I didn't tell you to do anything yet! You can't just start by levitating things you *care* about! That's very dangerous!"

"Well, why didn't you say so?" she sobbed, running her hands over the cello case, looking like she was afraid to open it. Harry looked at her; she had no idea of the power she possessed. He knelt down and took the wand from her.

"Let me," he said softly. He carefully laid the cello case down and opened the latches; he'd positioned it so she couldn't see it, but then she bent over the vertical lid to look and uttered a strangled sob. It was a collection of wood splinters and strings. The cello appeared to have been put through a shredder. Harry closed his eyes, bringing up a very clear vision of her intact cello, then opened them and gazed intently at it, saying, "*Reparo.*"

The parts of the cello flew about, fitting themselves together, looking like film rolling backwards. In a matter of seconds the cello was whole again, and Hermione took it from its case, drawing the bow across the strings. She laughed and looked at Harry.

"I feel--I feel like Alice. And I've just gone through the looking glass..."

He smiled. "How about going down a rabbit hole?"

She looked somewhat mischievous. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well--do you have any money?"

Now she looked suspicious. "Some."

"We can get some of it changed and get you a wand of your own. And a beginner's spellbook or two. And an owl, so we can communicate."

"An owl?"

"I'll explain on the way. We'll need to take the Tube to get to the Leaky Cauldron--"

"The what?"

"It's a wizarding pub. Come on..."

He picked up her cello for her, but she pointedly took it from him. Just as they were about to go down the steps from the stage, they heard footsteps in the corridor outside the auditorium and Harry felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck; he had a bad feeling. Something told him to pull Hermione back into the wings of the stage.

He pulled a curtain across to hide them, while Hermione hissed at him, "What are you doing?"

"Ssssh!" he answered softly, putting his finger in front of his lips. A second later, the door opened and two people walked into the auditorium, a man and a woman. She was tall and lanky, dark of hair, eye and skin. Harry recognized her. It was Angelina Johnson, wearing Muggle clothes: jeans and an Irish cable-knit turtleneck with a pea coat. She seemed very alert, her eyes moving around the space quickly, taking it all in. Fortunately, she didn't notice Harry peeking through a very small gap in the curtains. And with her...Harry couldn't believe it.

It was Gilderoy Lockhart.

He was wearing a shiny bronze shirt open almost to his navel, and he had a lot of gold chains around his neck and medallions on his tan chest. He looked like he spent all of his time in a tanning salon (or the wizarding equivalent); his skin was far too dark for his long, wavy blond hair. Beside Angelina's natural warm medium-brown skin he appeared quite ludicrous. His dark pants were also of some shiny material, and far too tight. He swaggered in, looking around nonchalantly. Harry held his breath. He sincerely hoped Hermione would remain silent.

After a quick visual once-over, Angelina took a wand out of her pea coat and waved it at the stage, saying, "*Revelatio.*"

Harry saw some strange sights; a pinkish version of his glasses, floating in mid-air; they were breaking, then being repaired. When they were repaired, they turned pale blue, then faded from sight. Then a bluish, ghostly version of the cello went flying up to the ceiling, crashed to the floor, and then was also repaired.

"Hmm," Angelina commented, having seen this.

"Well, let's go," Lockhart said jovially. "Clearly it was a false alarm..."

Angelina frowned. "No one may be here any more, but it *wasn't* a false alarm. Someone's glasses were broken through accidental magic. Then they were repaired with a wand. And there was some other wand-magic here. Hmm. We'll need to report this directly to the Minister, I think..."

"Oh, come on. She's probably met a witch and doesn't know it. She accidentally broke her glasses and the witch fixed them; ditto with the cello. How do we know any Muggles saw anything they shouldn't? Do you see any reporters outside? Is there a mad mob running from the building? Or is all quiet and Muggle-business-as-usual?"

"Well--"

Harry grimaced; he could see where it wouldn't be her first impulse to look to Gilderoy Lockhart as the voice of reason, but he hoped she would anyway. The slimy git could almost get me to like him, he thought.

Angelina sighed and put away her wand. "All right. I suppose we'll just report a false alarm. Back to the Tube station loo for me. Would you believe they still have that sign up saying 'Proud Winner of the Loo of the Year Awards - 1995!' I am so tired of seeing it. We've *got* to get a better Apparition point than that loo for witches coming into this part of the city. *And* could you do me a favor the next time we're partnered for the day?"

He gave what he probably thought was his most charming and seductive smile. "What?"

"Could you try to look a bit more, er, *normal*, instead of like a refugee from *Saturday Night Fever*?"

"What's that?"

"Seventies film about disco. I had a Muggle boyfriend for a little while who was into disco." She made a face. "Just one of many reasons it was never going to work..."

He moved closer to her; Harry fought to keep his food in his stomach. "This has been my best undercover outfit. The ladies all love it..."

"Ergh. Do you have to stand so close? You're old enough to be my father...It's fine for pub-crawling, I suppose. In certain neighborhoods. But it's a bit conspicuous, don't you think, for the British Library?" She sighed; there seemed to be very little chance that she would convince him.

"I am *not* old enough to be your father. How old do you think I am, anyway?"

"About ten years older than you want me to think you are. Anyway, there's no accidental magic worth reversing, and there's no one for you to put memory charms on. Let's go."

A few minutes after they'd left, Harry brought Hermione out from behind the curtain where they had been hiding. "Now do you believe me?"

She nodded dumbly, still taking it all in. "So," she said softly. "That was a witch and a wizard. And they came here in case they needed to reverse some accidental magic..."

"Well Angelina did. That was Angelina Johnson. She just finished school last year. I didn't know she'd gone to work for the Ministry. And *he* was Gilderoy Lockhart. He's an Obliviator."

She smirked. "She didn't much like him."

He shrugged. "I don't think anyone does but him. He's his own biggest fan." At least, Harry thought, Lockhart hasn't become a writer in this life, stealing other people's accomplishments and pawning them off as his own. Why is that? he wondered. Then he remembered Moody telling him about Lockhart's memory charm that he'd put on Neville after his parents were attacked; he'd gotten fired after that. Presumably, if he was still working as an Obliviator after all this time, he hadn't made any colossal blunders like that. On the other hand, since there was a labor shortage, it might take a lot more than that these days to get the sack.

Before they left, Harry took out his wand and shaved, but not closely; he decided to leave a bit of stubble, so he wouldn't look too young. After he made the shaven hair disappear (using Parvati's *Nonhirsutum* charm) he saw Hermione looking at him appraisingly.

"Hmm. I can see your face now. Neat trick, that."

He looked at her shrewdly. "We should probably do something about the way you look..."

She bristled. "What's wrong with the way I look? I get quite a lot of attention because of the way I look. Good for business. Why do you think I do it?"

Harry remembered the young men who looked rather out of place at a cello concert. "Fine, you look fine. You just don't look like the typical witch. Can I take off your makeup?"

"I don't have any makeup remover with me--" Harry held up his wand. She nodded. "Oh, right. Well, okay, I'm in your hands." She closed her eyes and waited. Harry removed the makeup with a wave of his wand, then changed her lock of red-dyed hair back to unobtrusive brown. He took her braids out of their ponytail and pulled them forward to hide her ears, then pulled her hood up. Finally, he moved his wand up the front of her cloak, effectively zipping it closed so that no one would see her shorts and ripped tights.

They managed to get the train across town without incident. When they reached the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione stared at it for only a moment before entering. He'd convinced her to let him put a spell on her cello to make it look like a rucksack with a long strap, which she wore diagonally across her body, the actual bag resting on her right hip. When they'd stepped inside the pub, he stayed behind her, taking his robes out of his pocket and transfiguring them so they were normal-sized again. He donned them quickly, then walked around her, fastening them.

She was staring around the pub, moving forward slowly, stopping when she came to a wizarding photo of the 1978 Quidditch team for England. Her jaw dropped as the team members jostled each other good-naturedly. She reached out and touched the surface tentatively, her face full of wonder. Next to it was the 1979 team photo, which of course also had moving players. Harry came to stand next to her, watching her face.

He spoke to her softly. "Don't look so much like you've never seen this stuff before. Let's go to the bank; we can get you some wizarding money and then try to buy you some things. On second thought...before we get you a wand, let's just start with a few spell books and an owl so we can write to each other. Post owls can deliver mail to anyone you want, and you don't even have to know where they are. The owl will find them."

She looked a bit disbelieving, then disappointed. "You're sure I can't get a wand yet? I'd quite like to do this thing you did with my cello; this is *much* easier to carry..."

"Keep your voice down," he said, glancing at Tom, behind the bar. Now that it was later in the afternoon, there were some patrons at the bar keeping him busy. Harry didn't think he'd taken notice of him and Hermione.

They moved through the pub and out into the back, where Harry used his wand to get the archway to Diagon Alley to open. Hermione gasped, then clapped her hand over her mouth. She stepped through, her mouth open in wonder as she gazed at Diagon Alley for the first time. Harry tried not to smile; he remembered the first time he'd seen it, in his other life. He tried to remember the first time he'd seen it in this life, but he couldn't; he simply had been brought to Diagon Alley as far back as he could remember. It was always a part of this life, never something that struck him as new or odd.

At the bank, Hermione froze and made a strangled noise the first time she saw a Goblin; Harry gripped her arm rather hard. "Please," he hissed under his breath. "You have to try not to show any surprise..."

She swallowed and nodded, still gazing uncertainly at the Goblins. He told her what to do and she walked up to one of the Goblins, taking out her money. Harry was the one having to avoid showing surprise now; she took out five twenty-pound notes, slapped them down on the counter and said in an authoritative voice, "I need this exchanged, please."

The Goblin nodded, picking up the notes and counting them. Then he said to her, "That will be fifteen percent for the conversion surcharge, leaving a total of eight-five pounds. You will receive seventeen Galle-

Hermione plucked the money from his hand again. "Fifteen percent! Are you mad? Two percent." She seemed to have gotten over her Goblin-shock.

Harry had never seen a Goblin really upset before, but he saw one now. His already-ugly face contorted into an even uglier mask and he stood on his stool to make himself taller. "*Two percent?* Gringotts has never—

She took down her hood and gave him a smile; he stuttered and then was silent. Finally, he took the money from her again. "Ten percent."

"Three percent."

"Nine percent."

"Three and a half."

"Eight."

"Four."

"Seven."

"Four and a half."

"Six."

"Five."

She wasn't budging. He raised his head, looking at her shrewdly, then finally nodding. "Five percent," he said reluctantly. He disappeared through a door for a moment, then returned with a cloth bag that looked rather heavy. It made quite a racket when he put it on the counter. Harry saw her eyes momentarily widen when she looked in the bag, then she clearly forced herself to be businesslike again. She took the large gold coins out one at a time, counting them loudly, until she'd reached nineteen, then loaded them back into the bag.

She thanked the Goblin and she and Harry left. He was feeling just a little grumpy because he'd paid twenty percent to convert his money earlier in the day; he didn't know you could haggle with the Goblins to bring the rate down. He was also feeling a bit dim; just when he thought he was in a situation where he knew more about things than Hermione, she managed to make him feel less than completely competent.

He knew she would enjoy Flourish and Blotts; they purchased *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade One*, which covered the early spells they'd learned in Charms and Transfiguration, *A History of Magic*, and *Hogwarts, A History*. Harry didn't think it would be a good idea for her to get into

Potions already, and he didn't want to scare her with any Defense Against the Dark Arts books yet.

She purchased a medium-sized tawny owl at the owl emporium. Cooing to him lightly, she named him Sebastian. Harry promised to take care of him while she was in New York; she would write to Harry and then he could keep Sebastian in the school Owlery until she returned; no one would notice.

"Are you *sure* I can't have a wand yet?" she almost whined as they walked back to the pub carrying her purchases. He sighed.

"I don't want to take the chance that you'll do something else like you did today. You need to do some reading first. When you go to New York you'll have a long flight; you'll need something to read anyway."

She frowned; "I usually look at my music and practice fingering while I'm on planes. But I've played the Dvořák more than a few times now...All right. I'll wait until I've done my homework."

When they were back in the Leaky Cauldron Harry bought some butterbeers for them, carrying them to a private room where there were armchairs drawn up to a cozy fire. Sitting opposite her, he watched her pleased reaction to the warm butterbeer. She swallowed and leaned back in her chair, eyes closed. Then she opened them quite suddenly, looking alarmed.

"Are you okay?" he asked, swallowing his butterbeer. She nodded.

"Still checking to see if I'm dreaming." She smiled. "I don't even know why I came here with you, but I'm glad I did. What I don't understand is why you're sneaking around to do this. And why those people from your Ministry of Magic don't want me to know I'm a witch."

Harry tried to explain about the ban on sending Hogwarts letters to Muggle-born students, but then he realized he had to backtrack and explain Voldemort, and his father's murder, and the other things that had happened over the years like the werewolf camps and the purges. And then there was Azkaban...When he paused for breath, she was shaking her head.

"It's too much to absorb in one afternoon..."

"A lot of this stuff is in your books. The recent history should be in the back. It is a lot, I know. But I think I'm doing the right thing. I don't believe Muggle-born witches and wizards should be kept in the dark. Even though most people have been forced to forget what they've done--I think it must still produce some confusing effects. By the way, I meant to

mention something; did you know that you're changing the length of the fingers on your left hand when you're playing? I could see it."

She looked shocked. "You could? I--I never realized that was magical...Of course, I never realized *I* was magical."

Harry sat forward eagerly. "It's something I can do too. You--you can't tell anyone, but I'm learning to be an Animagus. That's a wizard who can change into a specific animal form at will, without a wand or a spell. So--we each have something on the other. No blackmailing possible." He smiled. "It looks like you could accomplish the Animagus transfiguration if you wanted to try eventually."

"Can't everyone? I mean witches and wizards."

"No, it's a relatively rare ability. My dad was able to do it. My godfather too."

She looked at him with a furrowed brow now. "Why me? Why did you come looking for me?"

He swallowed. He hadn't told her about the change in the timelines. How could he tell her that, and then send her off to New York for a month? He had to wait.

"Well--I saw a list once. I wasn't supposed to. It had your name on it and some other Muggle-born witches and wizards. I have their names written down here; it was really just dumb luck that I found you so quickly today, but I was hoping maybe you could help me find these other people." He took a slip of parchment out of his robe pocket which bore the names of Alicia Spinnett, Dean Thomas and Justin Finch-Fletchley. "There's only three names; I'm trying to recall more, but it would be a good start if we could find these people." He looked at her uncertainly. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded grimly. "Yes. For some reason, I trust you. I still can't believe the way you fixed my cello...You were right. I should have waited for you to guide me. I still want to have my own wand, but I can wait. This is so--I can't even describe it. I think when I get up tomorrow, I'll expect to find it was all a dream." She took the parchment from him and stared at it in disbelief. "This looks like it was written several hundred years ago..."

"Oh, we always use parchment, quills and ink bottles at Hogwarts."

"Really? Hmph. No wonder you don't know how to find people. For *that* you need computers. I'll start when I get home." She stared at the parchment for a long minute. "That's odd; I could swear I recognize all of these names. Something about all of them is very familiar..."

"Send me some owl-post as soon as you know anything. Just write my name on the outside of the envelope, and the owl will do the rest. Oh, by the way, are your parents going to be dreadfully upset if you bring home an owl? And if you start having owls flying through the window delivering things?"

"I don't live with my parents. I stayed in America until I turned sixteen in September, then took my GED there. It's an American test to prove you don't have to go to school anymore, like a high school diploma. Otherwise, I would have had to go back to school this year and study for my GCSEs. I'm far too busy for that now, so I just wanted to get the whole school thing over with..."

Harry could hardly believe this was Hermione talking. "Who do you live with?"

"My teacher. She teaches privately and performs with her own string quartet too. She's used to me; tries to get me not to go out all night, but now she knows it's what I'm used to..."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Corrupted by America, were you?"

She laughed. "Oh, no! I discovered *jazz* in America! I'd take my cello and jam with the bands all night... You have no idea. The freedom of just letting the music take you wherever it wants to go, trading riffs with the other musicians..."

"You mentioned something about that before; playing with others. But aren't you launching a solo career?"

She grimaced. "Curse of the prodigy. That's what you're supposed to do when you become semi-famous at the age of twelve. Concertos actually involve a lot of back and forth with the orchestra, so that's not so bad. Of course, I'm being pigeonholed a bit as the 'new Jacqueline du Pré--even though I have to admit that I don't really mind that. I mean, she was brilliant. But everyone made her play the Elgar over and over, and I'll bet she became really tired of that. I've avoided even learning the Elgar so far. When I've been asked about it, I just say, 'Oh, I don't know that,' and I usually talk them into something else."

"The Elgar?"

"The Elgar cello concerto."

Harry nodded; she looked exhausted now, and emotionally drained. She sipped some more butterbeer, and then he suddenly sat up in his seat when a carriage clock on the mantel struck the half-hour. He looked at the clock face; it was five-thirty. He cursed vividly, then apologized to Hermione.

"Don't mind me. I've heard far worse from conductors. You have no idea. Do you have somewhere you're supposed to be?"

"Yeah; I have to get back to Hogsmeade, then spend the better part of an hour getting back to my school. I'd better transfigure your cello for and see you out."

She was draining her butterbeer and standing. After she took off the rucksack, Harry changed it into the cello again, and they went to the street door of the Leaky Cauldron. No one took any notice of Hermione's cello.

"When are you going to New York?"

"Sunday. I'm in rehearsal for almost a month, and the concerts are the last week in November. Then I'm heading down to Philadelphia to visit some friends from Curtis, and back here a couple of days later. So I'm gone on November third and back on December third."

Harry frowned; he hadn't counted on her disappearing for a month after finding out she was a witch. "Just be careful. Try to control your temper. You don't want anything to happen like--"

"Like the Carnegie Hall incident?"

He smiled. "I was bluffing. I have no idea what happened at Carnegie Hall."

She smiled back. "I know. Or at least, I figured it out. You're good."

"I don't suppose you want to tell me..."

"No, " she said firmly. "I don't."

He shrugged. "Oh well. Here, let me fix the front of your cloak." He moved his wand down the front again, like opening a zipper, and it looked as it had before. "Do you think--could I come see you again on Saturday? It's a Hogsmeade weekend--"

"A what?"

"Never mind. I could bring my girlfriend. She's a witch too; maybe you could show us this computer for finding people..."

"We'll see whether I actually find any of them. I'll send you directions to the flat by--by owl. Edith likes to go antiquing on Saturdays. She doesn't teach. So we'll have the flat to ourselves."

Good, Harry thought, then he thought immediately afterward, It's a good thing I'm bringing Ginny...

"You'd better leave now, before someone wonders about your clothes..."

She nodded and turned, while he stepped away from her so he wouldn't be hit by the cello. She held the cage with her owl in her left hand, and Harry had rigged up another rucksack for her new books, which she wore on her back. It looked rather heavy for her, but she didn't complain.

"I'll be in touch," she said simply, and then she was gone.

* * * * *

When Harry approached the mirror in the fourth-floor corridor, he was panting and out of breath; even though he'd been running for two months, he wasn't really prepared to run the entire way from the Hogsmeade village hall, which was exactly what he'd done. He felt like his heart was going to explode. He collapsed against the mirror before attempting to open it, then stopped when he heard voices on the other side.

"Thanks for waiting with me, Jamie," came Draco's voice.

"Well, Harry *is* my brother. And it would look pretty odd for you to be sitting up here in the corridor by yourself. If someone wants to know why we're here, we could just say it's for snogging..."

Then the words stopped, and Harry strained his ears to hear--anything. What was happening? He pushed cautiously on the side of the mirror opposite the hinges, moving it outward a couple of inches. In the slim opening, he could see his best friend and his sister seated on a stone bench set into a niche in the wall under a window, and they were kissing. He froze; even while he'd suspected that Draco was starting to be aware of Jamie, Harry had been baffled by the fact that he continued to pursue other girls for purely physical relationships, while steadfastly appearing not to have noticed that Jamie was even a female. Harry had been afraid this would happen for a while now, as Draco showed more signs that he was aware of Jamie's attraction to him, and also more signs that he might also be attracted to her. And then there had been the kissing in the secret passage to his mother's office...

They broke the kiss together; Harry had been surprised by how tender it had been. He recalled glimpses he'd had of Draco with other girls, and there had been a kind of animal desperation with them that he wasn't seeing between Draco and Jamie.

"Draco, can I ask you something?" she said softly. He gazed at her as though memorizing her face, nodding. "How--how many girls have you been with?"

He bowed his head now. "You--you know about that?" Now she was the one nodding. "I--I honestly don't know. Every time I thought of you, I just--I got so frustrated by the fact that I couldn't be with you, and I just went for whatever girl happened to be around, but none of them have ever been my girlfriend, because none of them have ever been you..."

He kissed her again, briefly. She looked reluctant to release him. They looked very right together, with her dark hair against his almost-white hair, her green eyes and freckles in contrast to his storm-grey eyes and pale cheeks just slightly touched by red as though he'd been practicing Quidditch in a high wind (although it could have been from his blood moving more quickly as he embraced her).

"I know you must--you must be disappointed in me. For not having more self-control..."

"No, Draco. I just wish I were *older*. Even now--I won't be fifteen until February twenty-fifth. It feels like an eternity away--"

"It's only four months."

"It might as well be four-hundred years. I've--I've loved you for so long..."

He brushed the hair out of her eyes and cupped her cheek in his hand. "I've loved you almost my whole life. Remember when we were little, and we said we'd always be together?" She nodded, her hand over his where it was pressed against her cheek. "I meant it. I know it seemed I'd forgotten, but I didn't. But you'd become so beautiful and grown-up, even though you weren't fifteen yet, and I was afraid if I said something that it would ruin our friendship, or my friendship with Harry, or we'd--we'd do something we shouldn't--"

She sighed, putting her head on his shoulder. "I can't believe Harry caught us outside mum's office. You'd think he'd be happy for us. After all, now he has Ginny. He knows what it's like to want to be with someone for years..."

Draco rubbed her back gently. "It'll be fine. Harry'll come around. And if there's anyone who'll make sure we don't do anything before you're fifteen, it's *him*."

Harry pushed the mirror open enough for him to walk through now and faced them. "I'm not so sure I'll be any happier about this *after* my sister is fifteen."

They stared at him. "How long have you been there?" Jamie wanted to know.

"Long enough. Listen, I understand that you think you're destined to be together..."

"Think?" his sister sputtered. "You should talk! You've got a girlfriend you were *stalking* for four years, and now you're going off to London to chase after a Muggle-born witch!"

"Ssshh!" Harry and Draco said together.

"Jamie!" Harry exclaimed. "What are you trying to do? Get me expelled?"

"Sorry," she mumbled. "But--"

"No. I'm sorry. I'm still a bit surprised by you two. I didn't think you were of the same mind concerning this. We'll have to talk about it another time. What time is it?"

Draco checked his watch. "Almost six-thirty."

"Good. We can still get something to eat. Then we need to grab Ginny and talk about what happened in London."

As they walked down to the Great Hall, Draco turned to him, frowning.
"What *did* happen in London?"

"Later," Harry said, seeing a couple of ghosts passing through the corridor ahead of them; they both turned their heads and looked directly at Harry with their eyebrows raised before continuing on their way. "I don't want to repeat myself."

They walked down to the Great Hall, and crept into their places at the Slytherin table relatively unobtrusively. Harry caught his mother's eye for a moment; she raised one eyebrow questioningly, but that was all. She didn't look disapproving or likely to corner him to ask for an explanation of why the three of them were late.

When they were done eating, they lingered until almost everyone else was gone. Ginny was still at the Gryffindor table, leaning over a book, reading while she idly spooned bread pudding with custard sauce into her mouth. Ron and Neville and Seamus were still present as well. Harry and Jamie and Draco tried not to look like they were looking at the other table.

At length, Ron stood and said, "Come on up to the common room, Ginny. You can read up there."

Harry was wondering how they were going to get her away from the three Gryffindor boys, but Jamie put her hand on his arm and said softly, "Let me."

She walked over to the Gryffindor table, flicking her long dark hair over her shoulder; Draco, to Harry's surprise was grinning as though he knew exactly what she was going to do.

"Your sister," he whispered to Harry, "is not only very pretty, *but she knows it.*"

Harry watched out of the corner of his eye with not a little trepidation. Jamie sped up and put her hand on Ginny's shoulder.

"Oh good, you're still here!" She turned a stunning smile to Ron, who froze and looked the least poised Harry had seen him all term. "Ginny is so nice; she's a year ahead of me, of course, and said she'd help me with this Potions essay Evans wants. Gah! I'm hopeless with Potions..."

"I'm good at Potions," Seamus said breathlessly, standing and trying to come between Ron and Jamie. Now Draco tensed up and gripped Harry's wrist rather hard; he had a dislike for Seamus Finnigan the origin of which was rather mysterious to Harry. Ron moved forward again and looked at Jamie slightly suspiciously now.

"Aren't you in Slytherin? Potter's sister, right?"

"Yes. Oh! You're Ginny's brother, aren't you! The Chaser." She turned and looked as though she didn't want Harry to hear, and her voice dropped. "You really make life tough for my brother, I can tell you. He can't relax for a moment when he's playing you."

To Ron's obvious annoyance, Seamus burst into the conversation again. "Really? Always looked like it was damned easy for him. No offense, Ron," he added when Ron gave him a good glare. "I mean, he just seems like such a natural. Strangest thing I ever saw, him going after the Snitch like that during the Ravenclaw match..."

Now Ron was able to be smug; Harry had seen this expression on his face quite a lot in the previous two months. "My girlfriend, of course, had no trouble catching the Snitch quickly once the game resumed..."

"Oh, that's right! Your girlfriend is Head Girl. She's quite pretty, isn't she?" Jamie batted her eyes at him and now Harry had to try very hard not to laugh; Ron looked quite suddenly as though he would very likely give a wrong answer if someone had asked him at that moment to state his girlfriend's name.

"Er, yes. That's her." He was looking at Jamie with a glazed expression. Suddenly, he shook himself, as if waking. "So, Ginny, what are you going to do?"

Ginny looked up from her book as though she hadn't even noticed this conversation had been going on right next to her. "Hmm? Oh, I suppose Jamie and I will just stay here and go over the essay. I'll be up. It's early still. I'll see you later."

Neville leaned near her, looking a bit anxious. "I can come get you later, Ginny. I can walk you back up to Gryffindor Tower..."

She regarded him dully. She hadn't been making as much of an effort lately to appease her brother concerning Neville. "No thanks, Neville. I don't know how long we'll be. I'm a big girl, and a prefect. I'm sure I can find my way back."

Neville grimaced and rose to leave. Seamus left Jamie reluctantly. Ron was saying, "Um, see you later," in a shaking voice, turning and walking away from her, but repeatedly looking over his shoulder at her as he approached the doorway. She rewarded him with a half-bashful, half-come-hither smile that had Harry wondering whether Draco was going to hit the roof. Instead, he turned to find Draco laughing, delighted with her performance.

When they were all in the anteroom, Draco picked her up and twirled her, saying, "That's my girl! Get'em all hot and bothered, then *wham!* Walk away with the sexy Slytherin..."

He kissed her quickly, while Harry glared at them. "Break it up. This isn't snogging time."

Ginny sidled up to him and stroked his arm. "That's too bad, because I have a pretty sexy Slytherin of my own..."

Harry felt himself reddening, and moved away from her a step. He didn't much like the idea of her talking like that with Jamie and Draco around; he felt it would set a bad example. *Or just reveal that you're human*, he reckoned Jamie would say.

He got them to settle down and explained the short version of what happened in London: that he'd gone to the British Library, found by pure dumb luck that she was giving a concert there that day (the program he'd brought back indicated that concerts were a regular occurrence at the Library) and his conversation with her afterward when he explained to her that she was a witch. He refrained from describing her appearance, but he included the part about getting her hacked off so she'd perform some accidental magic. When he described the visit from Angelina and Lockhart, the others gasped.

"You could have been caught! Then what would you have done?" Jamie was wide-eyed.

"Well, I'd have disarmed him and stunned her and run for it, I suppose."

"They work for the Ministry!" Ginny stressed. "How would you have taken on two of them?"

He smirked. "Well, in that one of them was Gilderoy Lockhart, that wasn't going to be any problem. Angelina Johnson on the other hand...I'm sure I would have been all right." Harry wasn't sure what he could say to support this, so he hoped they'd let it go. But Draco was looking at him oddly now.

"How did you know who he was?" he wanted to know.

Harry opened his mouth, unsure of what to say. "I, um saw a picture of him once. In the Daily Prophet. And I've heard about him. He's an idiot." He tried to sound confident enough that they would stop questioning him on this. But then Jamie decided to bring up something he said he'd told Hermione.

"I thought you said you couldn't tell us how you knew about these Muggle-born witches and wizards. Now you say you saw a list. Where'd you see this list?"

"Well, that's what I can't tell you..." The three of them looked at him, clearly dissatisfied with this answer. "Anyway," he continued, trying to get them off this subject. "She's going to see whether she can find the others. She'll try London first, obviously. I told her Ginny and I are going to come see her on Saturday. She lives with her teacher, but the teacher will be out. She'll send directions to her flat by owl-post."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "I'm going? Why am I going?"

"You can talk to her about being a witch while I take any information she might have and try to find the others. She's really interested in learning about magic and everything, but after what happened with her cello, I don't think she's ready for a wand yet. Maybe when she gets back from New York. And in the meantime, I can go looking for the others, if she turns up anything."

Ginny still looked a little nervous at the idea of going to London with him to see a Muggle-born witch. Draco and Jamie looked like they wanted to engage in more snogging, and when they asked if the "rebel meeting" (as they'd taken to calling these sessions) was over, he told them they could go. Ginny stayed, still looking rather nervous.

"Harry, I've--I've never been with Muggles. Ever."

"Ever?"

She nodded. "What do I do?" He smiled at her, finding her nervousness endearing. Yet he didn't want her to think he was laughing at her. He hugged her quickly, kissed her on the forehead.

"You'll be fine, he said softly, his brow touching hers. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"She nodded. "I know," she whispered. "I just--I never heard of anything so daring. You just walked up to a girl you'd never seen before and told her she's a witch."

He shrugged, trying to seem more confident than he felt. "Someone told my mum, once. And the other Muggle-born students who went here, years ago. It used to be a regular occurrence. Of course, I also had to worry about the Ministry people. It's not going to be easy for her to learn things if they're monitoring her so closely..."

"But," Ginny pointed out, "they can tell the difference between accidental magic and wand magic. Maybe if they detect wand magic, they won't show up. They'll assume it's a witch or wizard who isn't Muggle-born."

"Hmm. That's possible. And if the Obliviator is Lockhart--well, he's not exactly the hardest-working wizard in show business..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something silly." Harry was surprised by how often expressions from his Muggle upbringing with the Dursleys crept into his speech. "Well," he whispered, "I'd better go. I really do have a Potions essay to write, and my mum will have my head if it's not perfect. Then she'll give me six or seven out of ten, even if it *is* perfect."

"I don't understand about you and your mum."

Harry sighed. "That makes two of us." He kissed her quickly on the lips, but she didn't want to let him go. He looked into her eyes, seeing himself reflected there, and then he lowered his mouth to hers again, wrapping his arms around her, making her as much a part of him as possible, feeling her shaking in his embrace. To say he felt warm would have been an understatement; he felt as though there were molten lava flowing through his veins. Her fingers were in his hair, her breath was sweet bread pudding with custard sauce, a comforting taste, a Ginny-taste. He ran his mouth down her throat, fumbling with the fastenings on her robe, then the buttons on her blouse; she sighed when he moved his mouth further down between her bra cups, then gasped when he pushed the lacy fabric aside and took her into his mouth.

Time seemed suspended. She held his head in place over her breast, her breathing shallow, her skin flushed. She gently stroked his shoulders and upper arms, his neck and cheeks while he ran his hands up her back, caressing her lightly. Wherever she touched him, he felt an electric spark. When he removed his mouth from her and placed a reverent kiss against the silky curve of flesh there, pulling the fabric of her bra over her again and quickly buttoning her blouse, she let out her breath as though she'd been holding it. He fastened her robes over her blouse, patting her shoulders like a dresser in a robe shop. But when he looked in her face again, he could no longer be distant and detached; he clasped her to him and kissed her as though he were going to be ripped away from her at any moment, his heart pounding in his ears.

He broke the kiss, afraid that she would collapse; she seemed to be weak in the knees. He searched her face; it was laid bare, no pretense, no hiding her feelings. If he'd had any doubts about how she felt toward him, that look eliminated those doubts once and for all. He ran his thumb across her lower lip, swallowing.

"I'm sorry Ginny. I shouldn't have done that..." He had to exercise better self-control; she wasn't ready, he reminded himself. No pressure, no pressure...

She gazed up at him. "Sorry? You didn't see me stopping you, did you? Harry, the next time you do that, the last thing I want to hear you say afterward is that you're *sorry*..."

The next time. Harry caught his breath, gazing down at her. *She obviously wanted there to be a next time.* Okay, he thought, a next time for *this*, maybe; that doesn't mean she's ready for *more* than this...

"I, ah, should go work on that essay," he said softly.

She smiled coyly at him. "That wasn't very convincing."

"No?" His voice shook.

"No. Especially since you still have a death grip on me." He stepped back from her suddenly, releasing her. She laughed. "I didn't say I was complaining, did I?"

He smiled at her; his success earlier in the day (finding Hermione) combined with this encounter made him feel happier than he ever remembered being in this life. He wasn't touching her anymore, but their eyes were locked, making him feel like he was in the most intimate of embraces. He looked in Ginny's eyes, trying to tell her how much he loved her with just his expression. He didn't trust his voice. He'd never said this to anyone, in either of his lives. She gazed back at him, a slow smile making the corners of her mouth curl. Just before she spoke, he realized

that he didn't remember anyone ever saying they loved him, either. But she seemed to read his expression with no trouble, and responded as though he'd spoken.

"Me too," she whispered. "Good night, Harry."

She turned and opened the door, giving him a last look and a wistful smile before leaving. Harry wished he had her back in his arms again as soon as she was gone, but he decided to channel his happiness in a more constructive way. Before he did something as boring and depressing as a Potions essay, he would do some Animagus exercises, so he charm-locked the door securely. He had only done the full transformation once so far, the previous evening, but he again concentrated very, very hard, putting the right images into his mind, feeling the changes roll through his body, through his bones, his veins, his muscles...It was early in his re-training still, so he was only able to maintain the form for a few seconds before collapsing onto the cold stone floor. He stayed there for a few minutes before rising to try again. The pain was as bad as he remembered it, and yet--it wasn't. *Ginny loves me.* He wondered whether anyone had ever considered happiness as an effective pain suppressant...

He had changed completely into a creature that looked like a lion. He hadn't attempted to spread his griffin wings yet, but he somehow wasn't surprised that the golden griffin was still his Animagus form, that he hadn't found it easier or more appropriate in this life to metamorphose into something else. The form had come to him as naturally as flying on a broomstick, as logically as answering to his name or recognizing that he was still *him*, deep inside, no matter the other changes he had undergone in this life.

In his heart of hearts, he was still a Gryffindor.

* * * * *

The next morning, Harry walked into the Great Hall for breakfast invigorated from his morning run and shower and still slightly giddy from the things that had happened the day before, not the least of which was getting away with going to London and coming back without anyone at the school being the wiser (other than Ginny, Draco and Jamie). He thought of the map which was now in his possession; Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs would have been proud of him, he thought. Then he reevaluated that; Moony was stuck in a werewolf internment camp, Wormtail had received the dementor's kiss after betraying his parents, Padfoot was one of his professors and would perhaps *not* be very impressed by what he'd done. So that left his father, Prongs; well, James Potter might have been able to appreciate his accomplishment. That was something.

Harry didn't often think of his father. He found himself wondering about him more and more lately. What would he think of a son who was a

Slytherin? A Keeper, instead of a Seeker or Chaser? Someone who was incapable of pleasing his mother?

Would he have just as poor a relationship with his father as he did with his mother, had he lived? He didn't want to think so, but sometimes he thought his stepfather overcompensated for not being his natural father and refrained from reprimanding him or upbraiding him even when he thought he deserved it. How ironic, Harry thought, that in this life he should go out of his way to be like this, when in his other life he went out of his way to call Harry up on the carpet even when he'd done nothing wrong.

After breakfast Harry and Draco had Transfiguration with Padfoot himself. Harry was doing quite well with his large-scale work. So far he'd turned Sirius' desk into a goat, a cow, and a horse. Draco hadn't managed to produce anything bigger than a sheepdog (which had turned wooden legs identical to the desk's).

Most of the Ravenclaws in the class hadn't done much better than Draco. Evan Davies and Mandy Brocklehurst, being prefects, seemed to think they had some inherent right to do better than Harry (which they weren't able to accomplish). Only Terry Boot did as well. The other Slytherins did even more poorly than Draco; Norman Nott's desk turned into a doll-sized version of the piece of furniture, but it had a wet nose and a tail and chased Pansy Parkinson around the room yapping, then managed somehow to pee on her rucksack.

"Five points for Slytherin due to realism," Sirius told Nott, with a barely-concealed smirk. "Twenty points to Slytherin for Potter's excellent work, and twenty points to Ravenclaw for Boot's." Pansy was alternately glaring at Nott and her rucksack. Harry performed a sanitizing spell on it that removed both the urine and any residual smell.

He made a point of moving as far away from Pansy as possible afterward, but she looked at him slyly and said, "Aren't you just the clever boy lately, Harry. You know, my father is very influential in the Ministry. I've written to him, told him what an asset you would be to his department when you're done school. I told him he shouldn't pay attention to your only getting six O.W.L.s..."

Harry was alarmed. "Uh, Pansy, I don't see myself in government when I'm done school. Don't talk me up to your father..."

She followed him to where he was sitting near the windows, while Sirius talked to Evan about his work. "Oh, I don't mind. He'll probably have a job for me, if I want it, and it would be nice to work with someone I've known all my life. Remember when we played paper chase as children?"

Harry swallowed; ever since he started school, he thought of Pansy as an inherently dangerous person because she had known him so long, knew so many of his secrets. She was one of the few people who knew that Professors Snape and Evans were his parents and the twins were his brothers. She'd been slyly hinting that she was interested in him since third year, but he'd managed to deflect her. And now she was writing to her father about him. Her father was very tight with Lucius Malfoy. Would Mr. Malfoy be upset that Pansy wasn't trying to get his son a job too? Harry didn't know, but he couldn't see Draco in government any more than he could see himself.

"Yeah," he smiled feebly. "I liked being the fox." He especially liked that it allowed him to be a loner, instead of working in a group with the others to find the fox's trail. When all was said and done, Harry's first impulse was to do things on his own. He'd lost count of the times when Draco and Jamie had gotten testy with him for not telling them things, and that was *before* September first, when all of the memories of his other life were dumped into his brain.

Then something else alarmed him; he'd only gotten six O.W.L.s? How lame was that? After Transfiguration, the sixth-year Slytherins had a free period; before he left, Harry buttonholed Sirius to discuss this with him.

"Siri--I mean, Professor Black?"

He smiled genially at his godson. "Yes, Harry? Good work today. You've always done well with my class, but lately you've really come into your own..."

"Thanks. But I've been wondering something; you mentioned that you gave me two O.W.L.s. But I only got six over all. So that means I only got four others besides Transfiguration..."

Sirius frowned. "That doesn't sound right. I could swear I remember your step--I mean Professor Snape saying in the staff room that he'd given you two also."

"That's really strange, because then I would have gotten only two others..."

Draco joined them, frowning. "What are you talking about? You didn't get two O.W.L.s in Transfiguration and Dark Arts. Don't you remember your own test results? I remember better than you do, probably. Of course that's 'cause I was able to gloat, since I got nine."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I--I'm not remembering very well just now. Maybe my letter's in my trunk in the dorm..."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Don't bother. I told you I remember. No wonder you only got six; you got them in Transfiguration, Dark Arts, Charms, Potions, Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures."

Sirius shook his head insistently. "I tell you, I gave you two, Harry, and so did Professor Snape. There's something wrong here..."

Harry brightened. "So maybe there was a mistake? Perhaps I got eight? Maybe it was just a clerical error in the letter?"

Sirius frowned, deep in thought. Unfortunately, Pansy Parkinson had heard their conversation as she was packing; she chose this moment to intrude.

"Oh, if there's a mistake, you should definitely get it corrected, Harry. I mean, everyone down at the ministry received a report with the O.W.L. results for all the fifth years from last term, so they can start thinking about recruiting new employees early. What with the labor shortage and all. That's why I was talking to my father about you; he wasn't convinced he wanted someone with only six O.W.L.s..."

Harry was getting a bit upset upon hearing this. "So everybody in the Ministry of Magic thinks I'm stupid now?"

"Calm down, Harry," Pansy said, trying to be soothing. "I thought you didn't want to work in government?"

"I don't, but--" he floundered. How could he communicate his injured pride? To have performed like that and have so many people know it, and it turned out it wasn't even true!

Sirius smiled at him helpfully. "Well, I have another class arriving in a minute, but I'll do whatever I can to help you straighten this out. Your best bet is probably to go to your head of house, of course, with whom you do have a *special* relationship," he said with a wink.

"Oh, it's okay Professor Black," Pansy piped up. "You don't have to be all secretive around me. I know that Professor Snape is Harry's step--"

"Sshh!" Harry and Sirius said to her simultaneously. She looked a bit shaken.

Harry recovered quickly. "Sorry, Pansy. But I think I will go see him."

He bade Sirius farewell and walked to his dad's office, Draco by his side, Pansy mercifully leaving them. When they reached the office, he realized that his dad wouldn't be there; he was teaching. The time table posted on his door indicated that he was with the fourth-year Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Jamie was in this class. They went to the Dark Arts classroom

and stood in the corridor. They could see him through the open door, writing on the blackboard. He turned and happened to see Harry and Draco in the corridor and broke into a smile. Harry beckoned to him with his hand. Severus Snape turned to his students.

"Excuse me for a moment. Get to work copying the notes."

He stepped into the corridor. "I'm teaching. Is there something I can do for you later, Harry?"

"I'm sorry; I shouldn't be bothering you now. I have a free period. It's just that--I think there was a mistake with my O.W.L. results, and since you're my head-of-house..."

He stopped because his stepfather suddenly looked quite shaken. "How-- how do you know?"

"Well, it was something Sirius said. Kind of an accident, really..."

Severus Snape drew his lips into a line. "Draco; you're a prefect. I need you to take over the class for me until I get back. Harry and I need to talk..."

Draco looked startled. "What? Me? Take over the class?"

"It's fourth-year Dark Arts. You know this material. Just look at what I've written on the blackboard and when they're done copying it answer any questions they might have. You can do this. You'll be fine. What's the good in the school having prefects if you can't help the professors in this way from time to time?"

"Um--" was Draco's articulate reply. Frankly, Harry was *still* trying to work out the purpose of prefects, but he didn't tell Ginny this, as she was one, too.

"Good," Harry's stepfather said. "It's settled then. And I give you permission to award or deduct house points as necessary. Go on in now; Harry and I will be in my office."

Harry watched Draco walk into the classroom, having turned a color that made parchment look dark. Harry was immediately aware of a raised hand in the front row, but he couldn't see the owner of the hand. Draco nodded.

"Miss Potter?"

Harry tried not to guffaw; oh, Jamie was going to make his life hell until Professor Snape returned. Harry followed his stepfather to his office, remembering again why he'd come to see him. After they entered, Harry sat in a chair by the fireplace, while his stepfather sat opposite him, after

lighting the fire. Harry watched his face in the flickering light; suddenly he looked old and strained. Why had he reacted this way? Harry had never known him to precipitously leave a class. He'd have been perfectly satisfied if his dad had agreed to talk to him during lunch.

Now the older man looked at Harry, his fingers pressed together, his brow furrowed as he considered how best to approach the topic. "Tell me what you know."

Harry recounted for him the conversation he'd had with Pansy, and Sirius' insistence that both he and his dad had given Harry two O.W.L.s. His dad grimaced.

"Stupid idiot!" he muttered, looking into the fire, his face dark with anger. Harry resisted the urge to defend Sirius; he knew that, after all these years as colleagues, not to mention two significant men in Lily Evans' life (her husband and her dear old friend and children's godfather) they were still merely tolerant of each other, and just barely. Harry remembered that his first assumption on September first had been that his mother had married Sirius. How much simpler life might have been if she had! He couldn't tell his dad he thought this, of course.

But now Harry realized that his dad was calling Sirius an idiot for telling Harry something that he very much appreciated knowing, and he decided to defend Sirius after all.

"He didn't do anything except tell me the truth! Or at least, what he knows of it. What's the whole truth, Dad? How did I really do, and why don't you want me or anyone else in the wizarding world to know?"

His stepfather focused on him again. "I didn't mean that Sirius Black was an idiot, although I've thought that often enough," he almost growled. "I was talking about myself for saying that to him. Gah! It's so easy to get into trouble by bragging about your children..." Harry felt himself flush when his dad said this. "And then there's your mother..."

He knew, Harry thought, that defending his mother was one of the last things Harry was likely to do. (Yelling at Blaise Zabini for drooling all over her was another story.) "I'm afraid I'm still in the dark," he told his dad, who nodded.

"I know. That was the whole idea."

"What?"

His dad rose now, running his fingers through his short hair, pacing restlessly. "I--I don't know how to tell you any of this, Harry, and I blame myself for telling your mother to do it to begin with..."

Harry was starting to get an inkling that his dad wasn't just talking about test results; this was about something much bigger. "Dad? Does this have to do with my becoming a Death Eater?"

His stepfather whirled on him. "*What?*"

Harry grimaced. "Do you remember when we were at the Malfoys' for their Christmas party when I was seven? It was the year before the school stopped sending letters to Muggle-born students, and Mum was arguing with Mr. Malfoy. I was hiding in the corner, remember? You caught me and we talked. I--I said I didn't remember or understand most of what the three of you had been saying, but I lied. I understood everything. I remember everything. Well, okay, I didn't understand everything when I was seven, but I did remember it, and now that I'm older, I think I understand more of it..."

His dad went to the window and gazed out at the road to Hogsmeade.

"*What do you understand?*" he said softly.

Harry looked at his back. "That eventually you're going to take me to Voldemort to be initiated. He only spared me when I was a baby because Mum promised me to him. Because I'm in some kind of prophecy, and Draco too, and he's worried that we'll turn on him, so he wants to keep an eye on us. But you know what? He *should* worry. Because I don't want to be a loyal Death Eater; I want to be like you, a spy, working to bring him down."

He turned quickly. "*What did you say?*"

Harry looked at his pained face. "I know I'm not supposed to know, and I haven't told Draco or even Jamie. Are you still in contact with Dumbledore? Is he still around? I wrote a letter to him a little while ago, but I haven't heard back from him..."

His stepfather sat in the chair opposite Harry again. "You wrote to Albus Dumbledore about being a *spy*?"

"No, no. It was about something else."

He looked relieved, then resigned. "So, you know about me, do you? Since you were seven."

Harry smiled at him. "You're--you're someone I've always looked up to because of it. I mean, it's really dangerous, what you've done all these years. Not that I mind danger. Nor Draco. Okay, well, Draco minds danger a bit, but he's okay about things like that when we're in it together. And he knows his dad expects him to become a Death Eater, too. He doesn't want to, but he knows that we'll there to look out for each other."

"What I don't understand is why Mum treats me like she does. She promised me to Voldemort to save my life, then as I got older she seemed to like me less and less. I feel like I can't do anything to please her. And now you seem to be saying that she had something to do with my O.W.L. letter being changed. Why? Why does my own mother hate me so much?"

He leaned forward, putting his hands on Harry's upper arms, his dark eyes hooded. "She doesn't hate you, Harry. She loves you, very much. Yes, she promised you to Voldemort. I told her to; I said she didn't have to mean it. I didn't count on the way he would go about guaranteeing that it would happen, whether she meant it or not...So she decided on a different approach. She wanted to make it seem that you're not of any worth to him. She knows as well as I do that he has always tried to recruit the best and the brightest. I shudder to tell you how many former Head Boys and Girls and prefects have become Death Eaters, and not just from Slytherin." He really did shudder then, before continuing. "She didn't want him to think of you as a threat. She knew you would probably still have to be initiated, but she hoped...she hoped that he would disregard you if you seemed to perform poorly in school. If you seemed lacking in talent. She intercepted your O.W.L. letter before it was copied for the Ministry employees, and you, and she substituted the letter which said you'd only received six. I'm sorry, Harry. I should have told her it was a bad idea, but--"

Harry nodded. "But you never adopted me and Jamie, and Mum acts like she's our only parent a lot because of that. You know that to me, you're my dad, don't you? I don't care whether that's legally recognized or not."

His stepfather looked at him proudly, smiling ever so slightly. "I know, Harry."

Harry swallowed, looking at him. *She loves you very much.* She was trying to protect him. And distance herself from him, also to protect him. He remembered the mother who had given her life for him, in his other life, her cries that had infiltrated his brain when he'd been too near to the dementors. She wasn't any different then, it seemed. She was sacrificing having a loving relationship with her son so he would be safe...

He tried to blink back tears. "So, the way she treats me in class--"

He grimaced. "She tried to convince me to do that too, but I didn't have the nerve. I mean, you are quite good. And you know, on that original O.W.L. letter, you can read exactly what she really thinks of your work. She knows her son is quite brilliant, and it just kills her that she can't acknowledge it, that this has to be hidden or your life could be in even more danger than it already is."

Harry thought for a minute. "Is that why she didn't want people to know that she's my mother? And that you're my father?"

"Well, it would look rather peculiar for a mother to upbraid a student the way I know she has done with you for the last five years. It just seemed simpler to conceal the family relationships. I thought because so few people knew our connection, that I could appoint you as prefect in your fifth year, as I still believe I should have. I let her talk me out of that; she was afraid it was another thing that would make you seem valuable to the Dark Lord. She told me to make Draco the prefect instead. I asked her why, since he's your best friend and that could potentially make *him* seem a threat to the Dark Lord, but she said that if she had to choose between Lucius Malfoy's son and her own, she was going to choose her own. 'I didn't do everything in my power to save him when he was a baby for nothing,' she said to me."

No, Harry thought; she did that because I was controlling her, because I traveled through time and stupidly let Voldemort manipulate me...

But he set aside this thought and smiled at his stepfather. "So you wanted to make me a prefect?"

He received a smile back. "Of course. I know you would have done an excellent job. You're a natural leader."

"That seems to scare Mum."

"Yes. Especially since I just received a visit from Lucius Malfoy last week..."

Harry frowned. "Draco's dad came to the school.? He didn't say anything about it. Why was Mr. Malfoy here?"

"Draco doesn't know about it. He came to see me, not his son."

"Why?"

He looked Harry in the eye. "He wanted to talk to me about you."

Harry swallowed. Lucius Malfoy scared him almost as much as Voldemort himself. "Why?" he whispered.

His dad sighed. "Evidently, Pansy Parkinson has been writing to her father about you. She seems to be somewhat, er, smitten. She thinks that if she can smooth the way for you to have a career in the Ministry, you'll be grateful to her, and--"

Harry made a face. "I get the picture."

"No, you don't. She's been reporting to her father every impressive thing you've done in the last two months. That Patronus you conjured when the boggart turned into a dementor, your dueling performance against

Professor Flitwick, you name it. Suddenly, it's like you're a new person, a new wizard, and Parkinson has told Lucius Malfoy all about it, too. Lucius isn't too pleased; I think he suspects that your mother and I have been covering up how talented you are all these years. At first he was worried that I was teaching you privately, since I can conjure quite a Patronus myself, and I wasn't a bad duelist in my youth. I told him I wasn't giving you private tuition, but I don't know whether he believed me. By the end of his visit, I wasn't sure whether he *wanted* me to be doing this or not. I think he's probably been teaching Draco an extra thing or two over the years..."

"That's something that's puzzled me, dad. The curriculum seems rather easy these days, doesn't it? I mean, shouldn't we have done boggarts before sixth year?"

He nodded glumly. "That was Lucius' doing too. He convinced others who were on the board to pass the new curriculum which reserves many more complicated forms of magic for post-seventh-year apprentice programs. The majority on the board are Death Eaters now; if I'm not going to keep things from you any more, you might as well know that. They prefer to think that most of the students finishing their seventh year will be no more knowledgeable than fifth years used to be, and only their hand-picked fellow Death Eaters will be taught more advanced magic after they finish school. It's their way to try to move firmly into power, once and for all, to make sure that all of the up and coming witches and wizards who are most powerful are on their side. It's been rather frustrating to them that people like me have managed through covert work to keep the Dark Lord from completely running the wizarding world."

"What about Barty Crouch, Jr.? Is it possible he's controlling his dad with the Imperius Curse?"

His dad whistled in admiration. "You weren't kidding when you said you remembered that Christmas party. You know about that, do you?" He shook his head. "Don't think we're not worried about that. How much of what the Minister does is him, and how much is his son? We have no idea. There are a number of operatives in the Ministry, and we know pretty definitively which Ministry employees are with the Dark Lord and which are not. There are also other operatives like me, who have infiltrated the Death Eaters. And yet all we've managed to do is to keep everything as status quo as possible. And even then, there have been significant setbacks, such as the simplification of the curriculum and the decision to no longer recruit Muggle-born students."

Harry stared at the fire for a long minute; everything was clear to him now, but he felt no closer to a solution to it all than before. This world was just so wrong; how was he ever going to fix it? If Voldemort thought he was too powerful, he would just cut him down; he thought his mother was probably right about that. And yet, he remembered the power behind that

tandem spell...*that's* what would be necessary to go back in time and fix things. But how was he ever going to convince Voldemort to do this? He wondered whether Voldemort remembered the other timeline, as he did. If he remembered, that would make it even less likely he would want to undo this world. Not to mention that Harry didn't have any idea of how to find Voldemort.

"There's something else I need to tell you, Harry."

He looked up expectantly. His stepfather hesitated. "What?"

Severus Snape frowned. "It's about that initiation. I told Lucius that you and Draco were too young, but--"

"But what?"

He sighed. "It's to be in December. On the night of the solstice, the twenty-first. The longest night of the year."

Harry froze. So soon! Less than two months away. "Can--can I tell Draco? So he's prepared?" he asked softly.

His stepfather nodded. "Of course. And--you can tell Draco about me, if you wish. From everything I've seen...I trust him. He should know that there will be at least one adult there looking out for him. Since his father won't be."

"What about Jamie?"

He was shaken now. "What about her? Surely you don't think she's being recruited..."

"No, no," Harry hurriedly said. "I mean, can I tell her about you? She looks up to you too..."

He looked relieved. "Oh. Yes, yes of course. That's fine. I should have told the two of you years ago..."

Harry frowned. "Did you tell Simon and Stuart?"

He looked grim, shaking his head. "No. Maybe when they're older; they're only twelve. And Stuart has enough to worry about just now. There's no need to add to their worries."

Harry's head whirled. *December twenty-first*. His initiation. And Draco's. That didn't leave much time. Harry stood to go.

"I know you'll take good care of us both. Will he--will he put Cruciatus on us?"

A very sad, helpless look. "Yes," he whispered. "Probably."

Harry nodded. "There's this pain-management technique I read about; we can work on it before then. And what do you think he'll make us do? Will we have to perform illegal curses?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes he does that, sometimes it doesn't. He's a capricious person. Unpredictable. Except in one thing; he likes knowing that he's putting on a good show. So if there's something that can give a good show..."

"I understand. Oh, wait; you said I could see for myself in the original O.W.L. letter what Mum thinks of me...Do you have it?"

He shook his head. "No. Your mother does."

Harry squared his shoulders. "I'll talk to her after lunch."

His dad sucked in his breath. "Make sure you eat a good lunch. You'll need fortification." Then he smiled and surprised Harry by extending his hand, which Harry took gratefully. "Good luck," he told him with feeling. Harry nodded, grasping his hand, grateful to him for so much, not the least of which was the brave example he'd set for him.

They returned to the Dark Arts classroom and retrieved Draco, who looked very, very relieved to be finishing his first stint as a teacher. Harry tried not to laugh at the expression on his face. For some reason, he wasn't feeling upset or angry about the things he learned from his stepfather, even the information about their impending initiation. Having that information now made him feel forearmed, forewarned. He could plan what to do. The two of them could prepare themselves for the worst.

* * * *

He told Draco about his conversation with his stepfather. Draco's face looked completely bloodless when he heard about the impending initiation, and he looked like he was having trouble swallowing.

"Don't worry," Harry told him. "We'll train before then. We can practice putting Passus Curses on each other and trying to block the pain. It's almost like a kind of meditation; we can start later. It's just mind over matter."

"Oh, yeah," he drawled sarcastically, reminding Harry more of the Draco Malfoy from his other life. "Overcoming the Cruciatus Curse is just mind over matter. That's why dark wizards use it; because *anybody* can just overcome it..."

"I didn't say *anybody* can do it. Anyway, most wizards try to do things like counter-curses to stop Cruciatus. It's too strong for that. You can overcome Imperius, too, if you try hard enough. In fact, that's a lot easier than overcoming Cruciatus."

Draco shook his head; then Harry noticed that the rest of him was shaking too. Harry suddenly wished that Jamie were here to calm him; he didn't feel quite comfortable giving Draco a reassuring hug. He settled for punching him playfully on the arm.

"C'mon. You're a total badass. You can do this. We have two months to prepare."

"Less than two months."

"Close enough. Stop splitting hairs. We should get out there for lunch now. Anyway, I need your help for a little play I'm going to be putting on..."

Draco raised his eyebrows, then widened his eyes with shock as Harry explained to him what his role would be. He shook his head. "Oh, no you don't. I'll be in a world of trouble if I do that. I'll be stripped of my prefect's badge! And worst of all, Jamie will never talk to me again..."

"You won't lose your prefect's position. I'll be the one drawing the fire. Trust me. And we'll explain to Jamie afterward." Draco regarded him dubiously; Harry refrained from telling him that his dad had wanted him, not Draco, to be a prefect, and that prefects were generally considered more valuable Death Eaters. He also wasn't telling him what the Harry-lines in the play were going to be; only the Draco-lines. Draco was going to be as surprised as anyone else by what Harry had to say.

They were the first ones in the Great Hall, but once the bell rang, there was a mad rush, and seemingly in the blink of an eye, all four house tables were flanked by hungry students, reaching for platters of food and pitchers of pumpkin juice, laughing and talking and trading insults and flirting and giving advice about classes.

When lunch was about half over, Harry gave Draco a small nod; Jamie was sitting between them. Draco nodded back, then let another minute pass before beginning. He leaned out from the table, eyeing the professors at the head table, trying to make it abundantly clear which professor he was looking at.

He shook his head in awe, his best smug lascivious look on his face. "*Mm, mm, mm*. Doesn't Professor Evans look in fine form today? If only she weren't wearing those robes..."

Harry could see that Jamie's jaw had dropped and that she had the most furious look on her face; at that moment she was truly her mother's daughter. Harry would have been tempted to laugh, but he had a role to play. Oddly enough, it would lead to his being able to *stop* acting in future, but for now, he had some over-the-top emoting to do. He stood, pointing an accusing finger at Draco.

"All right! That's enough, Malfoy! I'm sick of this. It's bad enough when it's ignorant gits like Zabini who don't know any better, but *you know* she's my mother, and you *still* say things like that. I've HAD IT!"

He walked away from the Slytherin table and stood in the middle of the hall. Students at other tables were starting to take notice of what he was saying. "Does everyone hear that? Professor Lily Evans is *my mother!* Now will you stop talking about her in front of me? And just in case you need more incentive, my stepfather is Professor Snape! Yes, the Dark Arts teacher is *her husband.* Say something about her in *his* presence at your peril! They're also the parents of Stuart and Simon Snape, my half-brothers. We're a bloody family! So now will you all stop?"

He stopped to catch his breath, having worked up quite a head of steam. Everyone in the hall was staring at him; he saw that dozens of people were simply gaping. He looked up at his mother at the head table; he'd never seen her look angrier, and that was saying something. Even Professor McGonagall had no words. She looked at her Potions professor, waiting to see what she would do. It was silent as the grave.

His mother broke that silence. She stood, both hands on the table. "POTTER!" she cried, her voice ringing out with authority. "My office. NOW!"

"With pleasure!" he cried defiantly, turning on his heel and striding out of the hall. He didn't look behind at his mother, but he heard her footsteps following him. He was vaguely aware of the shocked faces turned toward him as he left, and he also heard the low murmur of gossip that started up. He'd wanted to do that for two months, and he felt exhilarated! If he really thought about it, though, he'd wanted to do that for over five years. His heart was pounding in his ears as he practically ran down the steps to the dungeon. This was a confrontation that he was looking forward to very much. Wild horses couldn't keep him away.

He arrived in the Potions classroom a minute before his mother. She opened her office door without looking at him and the lights flickered to life immediately. She went to stand behind her desk, leaning on it with both hands in fists. Harry stood before her, his chin raised, looking her in the eye. He tried to see the maternal love his stepfather had been talking about, but all he could see was fury. He'd never felt *less* loved in his life.

"What," she said in a barely controlled medium tone, "possessed you to do that?"

"It's called being sick and tired," he told her with a surly sneer. He seated himself in a hard wooden chair and put his feet on her desk, giving her another insolent look, daring her to do something about it. She was livid, but she didn't change her position.

"You know that we decided it was better for no one to know--"

"Oh, sod that!" he said impatiently. If you're going to be a rebel, he decided, be a rebel all the way. "Bloody hell, mum, do you *know* how some of the lads talk about you? Granted, you're the only female employee below the age of sixty, but *still*...I'm sorry you won't be able to grind me into the ground anymore without people knowing that you're doing it to your own *son*, but life isn't perfect now, is it?"

She came around to the front of the desk now, looking at him shrewdly. "Oh, is *that* why you did it? Can't take it anymore? Well, what makes you think you haven't deserved every bit of it?" she said with a nasty undertone to her voice. He stood now and looked her in the eye; she was mere inches away and he was several inches taller than her now.

" I had a little chat with Dad earlier and he told me about my *real* O.W.L. letter, the one *you* still have, the one you replaced. Now I know, despite everything you've done for the last five years, that I'm *not* the stupidest sod that ever walked the earth. I know now that I would have been a prefect if it weren't for you. And I know that I'm supposed to be initiated as a Death Eater at the Winter Solstice. And since I plan to be a spy, like Dad, I'd appreciate it if you'd stop treating me like I'm *already* a bleeding Death Eater, a willing follower of the bastard who killed my father, and do your best to pretend to have some motherly concern over me. Surely you can *pretend* to care. Dad claimed you replaced the O.W.L. letter because you *love* me..."

"I *do* love you!" she suddenly sobbed, her face collapsing. She leaned on the desk, her strength leaving her, tears filling her eyes. "Oh, Harry, I'm sorry you couldn't tell, but everything I did--it was all for you! I wasn't trying--I mean I--" Her mouth worked but coherent words had ceased to come out of it. Harry saw that his dad had been telling the truth, that every day of his life she'd been going through the motions of disregarding her own son in order to protect him, to make him seem just as contemptible to the Dark Lord to whom he'd been promised as a baby.

He felt the rebellion drain out of him and he put his arms around her; she put her arms around him as well, her head on his shoulder. "I love you, Harry," she repeated. He clutched his mother to him.

"I love you too, Mum," he whispered.

They separated at length, his mother dabbing at her eyes with the corner of her sleeve. She walked around the desk and Harry sat again, this time keeping his feet firmly on the floor. "I have something of yours," she said softly, opening a drawer. After some digging, she produced a very official-looking parchment that he recognized as an O.W.L. letter. He opened it and read the results:

He had basic and intermediate in Potions (that was from her!), Charms, Care of Magical Creatures (thanks Charlie! he thought) Dark Arts and Transfiguration. That made ten. He also had one each in Herbology and Ancient Runes. Not surprisingly, just like in his other life, he hadn't gotten Astronomy or History of Magic. But his total was a far cry from six; it was twelve.

He looked up, grinning. "I got twelve!" he breathed. It wasn't the thirteen he'd had in his other life, but it wasn't a bit shabby. He looked up at her, rewarded with a glowing smile; the first he remembered receiving from her in more than five years. His mother was positively stunning when she smiled like this, and he suddenly felt proud, not annoyed, that his mum was probably the subject of as many boys' fantasies as the prettier girl students. He looked down at the letter again, then back up at her. "Can I keep it? I promise not to tell any Death Eaters about it."

She laughed and so he did too. "All right. I--I wish we'd thought of some better way to do all this, Harry. Maybe this wasn't the best way, but it was all we could think of."

"Don't you mean the best *you* could think of?" he said softly. He didn't really want to continue to criticize her, but he wanted to raise a valid concern. "I mean, I know he never adopted me, but to me, Dad is my dad. Let him be my dad. Don't take on everything yourself." Then he smiled with recognition and a kind of self-knowledge. "I get that from you, don't I? Feeling like I have to do everything myself, feeling like it means I'm weak if I ask for help..."

She smiled ruefully. "Actually, you get a double dose of it. Your father and I both did that. It made for a bumpy ride at times. I mean James Potter, you understand."

He nodded. "I figured that's who you meant. It's something we both have to work on. I'm--I'm going to need you. Especially after the Winter Solstice."

She tried to stop herself from crying again, just barely succeeding. "When I think of you having to get the--the Mark--"

He went around the desk and knelt next to her chair, then put his head in her lap. "I know, Mum. But I'll be thinking of how I'm protecting you every moment. I'll make you proud of me. I will."

She smoothed his hair with her hand, surveying him thoughtfully. "What if they want you to do something horrible?" she whispered.

"I won't do it. I'll figure a way to get around it."

She shook her head. "No. You'll have to do it. Or they'll start killing people close to you. I don't care about myself. But there's Jamie. And the twins. You'll need to preserve your cover for a while, and that may mean doing some things that--that aren't strictly legal, things which will be difficult to do. Do you have the nerve, Harry? Do you?"

He gazed up at her, a sob stuck in his throat because he was overwhelmed by the way it felt to have her hovering over him, her hand on his head like he remembered vaguely from when he was very small, and he had felt loved when he was around her.

"I'll do my best," he said softly.

She nodded. "I know that's saying a lot," she said, and the confidence he heard in her voice touched him more than anything anyone else in the world could have said. He'd longed to hear that for so long; he felt that his heart would burst.

They both jumped when the bell rang for the end of lunch. Harry rose and his mother walked him to the door of her office. "We have to be in class together now," he said. "For the next hour-and-a-half. It's going to be a little strange..."

"Yes," she agreed. She'd found a handkerchief in her robe pocket and dabbed at her eyes. "I'll have to try not to praise you too much." She smiled at him, looking like this might very well be a problem.

"Don't worry," he said ruefully. "I'm not sure I remember any of the reading from last night, and I was falling asleep while I was writing that essay, so an excess of praise isn't something I think I'll have to worry about..."

She kissed him on the cheek. "You're a good boy Harry. I worried about you for a while, because you were sorted into Slytherin. I mean, your father and I were in Gryffindor..."

"But Dad was in Slytherin, and he's all right," he pointed out to her. She nodded.

"Of course you're right. It's just that I thought you--"

"I know. Can I tell you something that might help?"

"What?"

He told her about the hat giving him the choice of Gryffindor or Slytherin, and why he'd chosen Slytherin, to be with his dad and his best friend.

She smiled at him, smoothing back his hair one more time. "With that kind of loyalty, it's a wonder you didn't wind up in Hufflepuff."

"Nah. I'm not hard-working enough," he laughed.

"Well," she said, her eyebrows flying up. "Class is starting in a minute. We'll see."

The second bell rang and the class poured into the room. Harry went to the back row, sitting next to Draco, who was giving him a baffled look. Indeed, the entire class, especially the Gryffindors (many of the Slytherins, like Pansy, had known about his parents) were staring at him. He noticed Ron Weasley giving him an especially perplexed look, as though he were from another planet.

His mother began the lesson, writing Potions ingredients on the blackboard and talking about antidotes to body-altering potions as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred during lunch at all. Draco leaned over and whispered to Harry, "Is everything all right?"

Harry beamed at his best friend.

"Never better, Draco. Never better."

* * * * *

For disrupting lunch, Professor McGonagall revoked his right to go to Hogsmeade on Saturday. Harry didn't mind, as he wasn't planning to go to Hogsmeade anyway; he and Ginny would walk through the secret passage to the village hall (so he would actually be going to Hogsmeade, in a way) and then use Floo powder to go to London, to see Hermione.

She'd owled him with the directions to the flat she shared with her teacher, and she'd also hinted that she had found out some very interesting things about Alicia, Dean and Justin. Harry could barely contain his excitement when he was running around the Quidditch pitch Saturday morning. Of course, he was still riding on a wave of euphoria from the détente he and his mother had reached. After dinner Wednesday night, he and Ginny had snogged for some time in the old Muggle Studies classroom. They'd done a little more than snogging, actually, and this time, to her relief, he didn't say he was sorry afterward. She snuggled up to him on the couch, her head on his chest, and he felt *happy*, actually happy. He knew that in the not-too-distant future he would have his initiation (he'd told Ginny about it), and that made him apprehensive, but he felt like he was *doing* something about this life, this world, doing

something to fix some of its problems instead of just blindly accepting everything.

While he was eating breakfast on Saturday and other students were excitedly discussing their Hogsmeade plans for the day, Harry received some post from an owl he didn't recognize. It was large and tawny, with reddish wing tips and ear feathers. It dropped a soft, light package with a letter attached into his lap, then continued on its way, not even stopping for a snack. In fact, it was strangely light for something that was about a foot square and several inches high, and he wondered whether he'd received a package of feathers. He quickly finished eating and ran up to the fourth-floor corridor. He ducked into the passage leading to the village hall and lit his wand, so he'd have some privacy to open the letter and package. He began with the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please find enclosed the Cloak of which you spoke. I would have replied sooner, but it was packed away in a place that was very difficult to reach.

I have recently heard great things about you, and I trust I will hear more. Use this well.

Albus Dumbledore

Had his dad written to Dumbledore? he wondered. He opened the package, grinning, feeling the silky softness of the cloak rolling over his hands, just like he remembered. He had it again! His cloak; *his* cloak, James Potter's cloak. He put it in his robe pocket, making the wrappings from the package disappear with a wave of his wand. He carefully crept out into the corridor again, waiting for Ginny. She appeared not long after; she'd worn jeans and a blouse and cardigan under her robes so that she would look inconspicuous after removing her robes to go out into Muggle London. He kissed her on the forehead, feeling her shake with nervousness. He would surprise her with the Invisibility Cloak later.

"Ready?" he asked her. She swallowed and nodded, and they set off. The walk to the village hall seemed to go much more quickly with her beside him, and in no time they were tumbling out of the fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron. They'd pulled up the hoods of their robes before entering the fireplace, so people wouldn't be able to see as much of them. Tom was busy behind the bar when they arrived, and they quickly left the pub on the London side. They immediately removed their robes; but it was a rather cold day, so the first chance he got, Harry ducked into an alley, and while Ginny shielded him, he transfigured their robes into woolen jackets that resembled things he'd seen other teenagers wearing when he'd been in London on Tuesday. They went to the Tube station and followed Hermione's detailed instructions for which train to take and when to

change to another branch, and they were soon emerging from the Underground a mere block from her flat.

Harry's stomach was doing flip flops as they knocked on her door; what would she and Ginny think of each other?

He needn't have worried; Hermione was delighted to meet Ginny, and the two of them were chattering away in less than five minutes about magic and wands and Goblin rebellions. It helped, he thought, that she looked very ordinary and low-key today. The red curl was in evidence again, but she only had a few studs in her ears, no feather earring, no makeup, and her braids were pulled back on the nape of her neck again. She was wearing a simple black turtleneck and stretchy black pants, no ripped tights, and her arm tattoos were covered. She appeared to be wearing black ballet shoes.

Hermione had been practicing when they knocked; they heard her interrupt herself to let them in. After she and Ginny had spent a few minutes getting acquainted, she acceded to Ginny's request to play, and Ginny watched her left hand, as Harry had advised her.

"I saw it!" she exclaimed afterward. "I saw your fingers stretch..."

Hermione smiled. "I don't even think about it. It just happens. I had no idea it meant I was a witch."

Then she showed them what she'd found out about Alicia, Dean and Justin. Alicia, it turned out, had just won two gold medals in equestrian events in the summer Olympics. Harry stared in awe at the photocopies of newspapers Hermione showed him; that was Alicia all right. Hermione was friends with the assistant to the Times music critic, and the assistant had quickly found everything Hermione needed in the newspaper archives.

Dean was in the papers too; he was the most sought-after young footballer in the country, practically. Harry smiled, remembering Dean's West Ham posters, and his insistence that some of the Quidditch players committing egregious fouls should be given red cards. Apparently, everyone was waiting with baited breath for him to be old enough to be signed on as a professional, and it was no secret that he would probably play for England, as well. Reading descriptions of supposedly "inhuman" things that Dean Thomas had been known to do, Harry had a feeling he knew the reason why these things had occurred.

Finally, there was Justin. He was pictured in a Times photograph with none other than Prince William and his brother, and their father, Charles, Prince of Wales. Justin was a prefect at Eton who had taken young Wills under his wing, and the prince had invited Justin to Balmoral along with some other school chums. Harry smiled at the picture of the bluff, friendly Justin, hobnobbing with royalty.

"Of course," Hermione said, "because they're all a bit famous, they might be a little hard to get to. Especially Finch-Fletchley. Security at Eton is pretty tight, as you might expect. And Alicia Spinnet is way out in the country on her parents' horse-breeding farm when she's not traveling all over the world for competitions. But Thomas is right here in London. I tracked down his address and everything. Well, my friend did, but here it is. You could just take the Tube and go see him, try to convince him to listen to you."

Harry stared at the piece of paper; Hermione had even written out a detailed description of which trains to get to reach Dean's house. He grinned at her; he'd forgotten how thorough she was about everything. "That's great. Shall I just go try, then? And you two can talk. Just pump Ginny for information; she can tell you anything you want to know. Her dad works for the Ministry and her brother teaches at our school."

When he left the flat, the two of them were seated on a couch chatting away, and Harry couldn't help but grin at the sight of them. He looked down at the paper in his hand. Soon he might be talking to Dean! It was almost too good to be true...

And everything was going just fine, at first. He got on the Jubilee line, then switched to the Piccadilly, but then he saw something--or rather, someone--that made his heart almost stop.

It was Ginny.

Only it wasn't. There was a woman on the train with him who was the spitting image of Ginny, if Ginny were about ten years older and had blue eyes and hair that merely reached her shoulders instead of cascading down her back. Her freckles even looked the same as Ginny's. Harry tried to continue breathing; this couldn't be happening, could it?

He completely forgot about Dean. When the red-haired woman changed trains, he followed her. When she went up to the street and walked purposefully to a small market with a newsagent next door, he loitered at the newsagent, pretending to make up his mind between the Times and the Sun, until she emerged again with a paper bag that had flowers protruding from it. He thought about taking out the Invisibility Cloak, so he could follow her more unobtrusively, but she soon began climbing the steps to an Edwardian house that had clearly been divided into flats; he wasn't even sure where he was, because he'd been blindly following her, instead of watching for the stations he needed to make the trip to Dean Thomas' house.

He watched the door of her building close, then after a few minutes, he saw some lights go on in the second-floor flat; it was an overcast day. He counted to ten, then dared to climb the steps and ring the bell that seemed to go with the right flat. After a few minutes, she appeared at the

door. She didn't open it; there was glass in the door, and she pulled back the curtain that hung there, looking at him uncertainly.

"Yes?" he could hear her say through the glass.

"I need to talk to you," he said, hoping he seemed like a nice, non-threatening boy instead of a teenager from hell. "Are you--" he paused, uncertain; "adopted?"

She blanched. She unlocked the door and swung it open. She stood in the doorway, not admitting him.

"How did you know?"

"Is your name Annie? Or possibly Peggy?"

"My--my name is Margaret. I usually go by Maggie."

"So--you were born in 1972?"

She looked even paler. "Yes." It was so strange to be speaking to this stranger with Ginny's face, but Ron's blue eyes. *I found one of their lost sisters!* an ecstatic voice inside him cried. He glanced at the doorbell he'd pressed.

"So," he continued. "Your name is Maggie Parrish?"

"Yes." She was looking wary now.

"Why were you adopted? Do you remember?"

"There was an accident. And I don't remember anything from before that..." Her eyes looked moist.

"Accident?"

"My entire family died in a car accident, except for me. I had horrible amnesia, and I still don't remember any of my early life. The Matron at the hospital had to tell me my name was Margaret. I didn't even remember that."

Harry didn't know what to say. It all came spilling out without time to think. "Your family didn't die in a car crash! They're all alive and well. I'm personally acquainted with them..."

"You are?" He couldn't read her expression. It seemed to start out as shock, then turned into something rather unpleasant; she looked quite angry.

She abruptly slammed the door in his face. He heard her running back up the stairs to the flat. He pounded on the door, to no avail. *Oh, boy*, he thought.

Wait until I tell her she's a witch.

Chapter Eight

The Sister

Harry stared at the door which she had slammed in his face. He rang the electronic doorbell again, leaning on it, even though he knew that this was rude. He had another problem now.

He backed up and looked at the second-floor windows. He cupped his hands around his mouth and called, "*Maggie! Miss Parrish!* Please! I'm sorry I startled you, but now that I've followed you home, I'm afraid I'm lost! If you could at least---"

She flung up the sash of the window directly above him and yelled back testily, "All right, all right! Shut up!"

He gazed up at her, so like Ginny, and yet so---Muggle. Ginny hadn't been exposed to much of the Muggle world so far, just the trip from the Leaky Cauldron to Hermione's flat, but she'd been as wide-eyed about the Tube and London stores and automobiles and buses as Hermione had been about everything she'd seen in Diagon Alley. Maggie appeared to be a Ginny who understood the Muggle world, who was completely comfortable with all of the day-to-day details.

She looked down at him grimly, then slammed the sash down. A couple of minutes later, she was opening the door again, ushering him inside. The vestibule of the building was a good five by six feet, meaning that they could stand inside and face each other without being particularly close. She leaned against the wall with her arms crossed, staring at him truculently.

He looked back nervously, still amazed by how much she looked like Ginny. Smiling feebly, he asked tentatively, "Can I explain?" She still glared at him. He waited. Still no reply. He reverted to his other plea. "Listen, here's the address I was trying to get to when I noticed you on the train." He held out the directions to Dean's house. She stared listlessly at the paper.

"Why did you follow me home?" she demanded, thrusting Dean's address back at him.

"Well," he began cautiously, "I have this girlfriend, and she had two older sisters who were born in 1970 and 1972. They disappeared during the

Easter holidays in 1979. You look just like my girlfriend. Except she has brown eyes. I just---when I saw you, I *had* to follow you. If I could tell her where one of her sisters is..."

"Sister?" she whispered.

He nodded nervously, expecting to be ejected any second. Suddenly, a dark-haired man with a very pronounced arch to his brows appeared at the door, making Harry jump in surprise. He had a key, but Maggie Parrish quickly stepped forward and opened the door for him; he wore sweats and running shoes and had the most muscular Jack Russell terrier Harry had ever seen. He must have gone running with the dog, Harry thought.

Then the man Harry had thought was just another tenant leaned over and kissed Maggie Parrish on the mouth quickly. He spoke breathlessly, still slightly winded from his exercise. "Hello, Love. He gave me a run for my money. Why is it he never seems to lose weight when we do this?"

She smiled lovingly at him. "I thought we were trying to get *you* to lose weight, not him. Anyway, he's all muscle, aren't you Billy?" The last part of her statement had been directed at the dog in a sing-song voice; she crouched next to him, patting his side firmly but affectionately, while the dog turned and lifted his head so he could lick her chin. She laughed, petting him some more. *Billy*, Harry thought. Did she name the dog after her oldest brother without knowing it?

The man had noticed Harry and looked at him as though he were trying to avoid seeming hostile, but also as though he would be perfectly willing to be as hostile as necessary should the need arise. "Who's this, then?"

Maggie stood and raised her eyebrows at him, her arms crossed again, her lips drawn into a line. He thrust his hand at her sweaty, winded boyfriend. "Harry Potter. Nice to meet you, er--"

"Bernard Parrish." He grasped Harry's hand rather hard, and Harry met the pressure obstinately, without showing any strain. They released each other's hands warily, still sizing each other up. Harry realized that he and Maggie had the same last name; they weren't dating, they were *married*. He spied rings on each of their left hands and tried not to smile with pleasure; Mrs. Weasley would love that! Bill and Charlie still weren't married. Of course, Maggie was one of the two top reasons *why* they weren't married. He cleared his throat.

"Could I possibly come inside to talk to you both? If you don't like what I have to say, you can set your dog on me..."

He tried to sound light-hearted, but for a moment they looked as though they might seriously consider doing this, and he looked back and forth at

their faces nervously. Finally, she relented and said, "All right. Let's go up."

The Parrish home was warm and comfortable. The walls were painted a Provençal yellow, the overstuffed upholstery was deep burgundy, and there was a thick oriental carpet on the floor before the fireplace, where Bernard Parrish was stooping, selecting just the right pieces from a stack of wood so he could start a fire. *Gryffindor colors*, Harry thought. The room was done in Gryffindor colors...

Maggie waved Harry to a chair while Bernard finished lighting the fire. He sat next to his wife on the couch, his arm around her protectively while they looked at Harry. Facing the two of them, he was suddenly more nervous than ever before in his life. What if Parrish had a meltdown upon learning that his wife was a witch? What if *she* did? Harry had definitely *not* counted on this.

Billy leapt upon the couch and settled next to Maggie, putting his chin on her leg. She smiled down at him and rubbed him behind the ears. Harry was calmed by this somehow and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry to intrude into your lives like this. I just happened to see Maggie on the Tube, and she looks exactly like my girlfriend, who had two older sisters who went missing in 1979. The younger sister was born in 1972, like Maggie, and her name was Margaret. She family called her Peggy. It just seemed too much of a coincidence. And Maggie said that she was adopted and doesn't remember anything from before she was seven. I told her that I know her family, that they hadn't died in a car crash--and she slammed the door in my face."

Maggie leaned forward, her face in her hands, her husband no longer touching her. When she lifted her head again, he saw that her eyes were red. "What do you expect me to do when you tell me that my parents abandoned me? What *happened*? Was I beaten and abused? Is that why I can't remember anything from before I was adopted?"

"No, no," Harry assured her, frowning. "Why? Did someone tell you that?"

She leaned back, shaking. "No. When I was growing up, doctors kept telling me that I should remember everything, in fact. Kept saying that there was nothing physically wrong with me, no head trauma. Blocking the memories was something I was doing on purpose. They assumed that it came from emotional, rather than physical, trauma, that I came from an abusive household and they'd grown tired of me and put me out, or something. I'm not sure why the hospital matron told me I was the lone survivor of a traffic accident."

Harry shrugged. "I suppose she thought you would believe it."

She nodded. "You say you know my family. Please--can you tell me what happened? Why did they send me away?"

"They didn't send you away." Then he did his best to tell her the story of her disappearance, omitting any references to magic. "Your brothers have never really gotten over it. They thought it was their fault, even though they were only thirteen and fifteen. Your parents had two more children after that; a son in 1980 and another daughter in 1981. That's Ginny; she's my girlfriend. It's amazing how much you look like her..."

She rose and walked to the fire; she rested her head on the mantel, staring. "*Abducted*," she breathed. "I can't believe it. I was abducted. And then what? Was I--sold? Like a black-market baby?"

Her husband looked grim. "It sounds like that. Must have been some sort of organized ring. The blokes doing the abducting might have been operating independently, offering children to slightly dodgy adoption outfits. Your parents *are* on the old side..."

She looked up at her husband. "Well, that was because of--you know--"

Bernard turned to Harry and explained. "Her mum and dad had a daughter of their own. She died. Leukemia. By then they were almost fifty, and when they decided to adopt, agencies didn't want to touch them. Even the ones who would give them the time of day wouldn't consider letting them adopt a baby, so they said they would take an older child, a girl, preferably with red hair..."

Maggie sat on the raised hearth, hugging her knees. "Valerie had red hair. Their other daughter," she said softly.

Harry frowned; it seemed plausible. Someone who was simply paid to deliver the goods kidnapped Annie and Peggy and took them to be adopted by people who were desperate and had no other means of having a family. But something nagged at him. Somehow, the way they'd disappeared from the park in Ottery St. Catchpole still screamed that magic was involved. How else had she lost all memory of her early life if not through a memory charm? Perhaps a ring of Death Eaters was abducting Muggle children for the black-market adoption business, and they'd simply assumed Annie and Peggy were Muggles.

He looked at Maggie and Bernard Parrish; after shocking them with the news that he knew her birth family, he couldn't just blurt out that she was a witch. Hermione's reaction hadn't been dreadful, but he didn't think he'd handled it expertly. He needed to tread lightly before trying that again; and he was still wary of what her husband's reaction would be. He'd given them enough startling news for now.

Harry looked at her, sitting on the hearth, moving bits of a burning log with the poker. The flames lit her face, so uncannily like Ginny's. She looked up at him, then her husband, and laughed. "So. Do you think I should hang it up, Bernie? After all, I never saw *this* coming."

He smiled at her. "Oh, come on. When's the last time you saw anything coming for yourself? You can only do readings and charts for other people. I know you've said you just want to live your life spontaneously, without knowing what's going to happen...Course, that's probably just because you're rotten at doing it for yourself..."

Harry was perplexed. "What?"

Maggie turned to him. "Oh. Right. See, when you first rang my bell, I thought you'd followed me because you wanted a private session. I've had fans follow me home from the studio before, but I only do readings for close friends now. This seems to happen every time the car is at the mechanic's and I end up taking the Tube..."

Harry shook his head. "Sorry. I'm lost. Am I supposed to recognize your name?"

She looked embarrassed now. "Oh, listen to me, thinking I'm so well-known. That'll teach me. You have no idea, do you?" He shook his head dumbly.

"Maggie," her husband said proudly, "is the foremost Seer, Prognosticator and Tarot reader in London. Which probably means in all of England."

"Except for the fact that I can't make a decent chart for myself. I've tried, many times, but it just all goes wrong, so I've given up."

Bernard continued, "She writes an astrology column that appears in a slew of rags--sorry darling--highly-reputable newspapers--" She stuck her tongue out at him; Harry liked how playful they were with each other. "She appears on the telly to discuss what's lurking in the wings for England's and Hollywood's film luminaries; and," he went on, smiling, "she was even consulted by the Prime Minister's wife. That was a bit of a scandal. Not for our Maggie, of course; for the Prime Minister's wife. For *my* darling wife it was something of a coup. Put her on the map."

Harry furrowed his brow. "So, you do Tarot readings?"

She nodded. "And star charts. With a person's exact time and location of birth I can produce a complete chart. As long as it's not for me, like I said. I also do tea leaves and I have a crystal ball, and I also read palms. I was doing an early-morning taping today for *Eye On Cinema*. You know, celebrity predictions." She smiled. "Now you're wondering why I was

nervous about you, since you're thinking, 'Brilliant. I'm stuck in this flat with this woman who's crackers and her crackers husband and dog--'"

"Hey!" Bernard said, trying to sound offended, but ruining it by laughing.

Harry smiled at them; this was wonderful! She knew about some of her abilities and she was *using* them, making a living at it. "Actually," he said, nodding at the dog, "Billy doesn't seem crackers at all."

Maggie and Bernard both laughed at that, and she went to sit next to her husband again. She gave Harry an appraising look. "So," she said, sounding very much like a solicitous older sister, "you're my little sister's boyfriend. A bit grown-up looking, aren't you?"

He'd neglected to shave again that morning and had a slight shadow on his face. The curse of having black hair, he thought, rubbing his hand over it. "I'm sixteen. She's fifteen. We've been together since June. But I sort of--had a crush on her for years before that."

"Well, you seem to be all right. Went out of your way to come here and talk to me, took the chance that I wouldn't think you're some kind of crazed stalker--" Harry looked down, thinking about following Ginny around Hogwarts. "You didn't know that I wouldn't call the police. Actually, I was this close..." She held up her finger and thumb. "And then you started in on being *lost*," she smiled, "which just struck me as funny. How many stalkers ask for directions? I thought you were most likely harmless."

He remembered her face in the vestibule; she hadn't looked like she'd come to this conclusion right away, but he wasn't going to argue with her. Her husband put both arms around her affectionately; they seemed like they might be newlyweds, Harry thought. They were very sweet together.

"Anyway," he said to his wife, "if he'd given you any trouble, you could have just made the flowerpots fly at him or something. Used your magic powers against him." Harry's jaw dropped. Had he just said what he *thought* he'd said? And she remembered it! They both did. Clearly the Ministry monitoring was less than perfect. On the other hand, the Ministry didn't know that Maggie Parrish was a witch. They didn't know that she was probably the long-lost Peggy Weasley.

Maggie laughed. "Stop it! I do not have magic powers!" She turned to Harry. "It's stupid, really. Sometimes odd things *have* happened--"

"I swear! She truly is magical!" he grinned.

She swatted him playfully. "Calls me Maggie-the-Witch, he does. Because he knows I hate it. And yes, sometimes things--happen--around me, but I

think that there's always a logical explanation for everything. If we don't know what it is, we just haven't looked hard enough."

"It sounds like you have more in common with your little sister than just your looks," Harry said, but the moment he did, he was thinking, *That was dumb.*

Her eyebrows flew up. "What?"

"There you go, Mags! It must run in the family! You come from a clan of witches!"

She swatted him again. "Stop that! I do not! I'm sure they're perfectly normal..."

Harry fought down a guffaw, thinking of Mr. Weasley's plug collection. He thought of flinging garden gnomes over the privet and the ghoul in the attic. He thought of owl post and talking heads in fireplaces and dishes flying about the kitchen washing themselves and the clock which had *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner and You're late!* on it instead of numbers. He thought of the flying Ford Anglia...

"Well," he said, when he felt certain he wouldn't erupt into laughter, "would you like to meet your sister? She came down to London with me. She's at my friend's flat. They're getting acquainted. I was supposed to be looking for--well, it's a long story. I can do that another time. This seems more important, suddenly. Would you like to meet her?"

She widened her eyes, looking frightened. "She's here? In London?"

"Yes. And if you come with me...I might avoid getting lost on the way back," he added sheepishly. She turned to her husband.

"What do you think?"

He shrugged. "It's up to you."

She frowned, rising and pacing around the room. "I wish I could do decent charts for myself..." She eyed Harry thoughtfully. "There's still something you're not telling me. I can tell by your aura."

Harry goggled. "You can see my aura?"

Bernard rolled his eyes. "Here it comes. The aura nonsense..."

Maggie smiled ruefully. "He refuses to believe. But another reason why I slammed the door in your face," she said to Harry, "is your aura. I've never seen anything like it, ever."

Harry frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, you have *two* auras. Very clearly. One is sometimes stronger than the other. Right now it's the green-tinged one. Sometimes it's the red-tinged one. But I can always see them both. And right now, both of your auras are a little black as well, which means you're holding something back. Not lying exactly, but close."

Harry squirmed; Trelawney would lose her job if Maggie Parrish ever showed up at Hogwarts. She was the genuine article. Did he have two auras because he had the memories of two lives? How strange that she couldn't do charts for herself...But then it occurred to him why this might be.

"When's your birthday?" he asked her suddenly. She stepped back.

"What?"

"When's your birthday? What date have you been using to do charts for yourself?"

"December thirty-first."

He frowned, trying to remember what Mrs. Weasley had said; something about Annie being born on the very day that Charlie started school, which would be September 1. But when was Peggy born?

"Who told you that was your birthday?"

"My parents, of course."

"Yes, but who told *them*?"

She looked blank, then sat down suddenly. "*Oh my God.* You're right! How on earth *would* they know? That can't be my birthday! Bloody hell! Oh, excuse me," she added hastily. "No wonder I've never been able to do a decent chart for myself..."

Harry swallowed, closing his eyes. *Think, think*, he commanded himself. What did Mrs. Weasley say about Peggy's birth?

*And when Annie was just a couple of months past her second birthday,
Margaret was born. Named after my sister Meg. We called her Peggy.*

"Maggie," he said slowly, "I think your birthday is around November first, not December thirty-first."

"November first? That was yesterday. How do you know?"

"Because--because your mother told me. In --and you're going to think this is strange--another life." Harry didn't know how else to communicate this, but if there was anyone in London likely to believe him, it was Maggie Parrish.

"That's it!" she cried, leaping up. "That's why I'm seeing two auras on you. Just now, when you were looking like you were thinking very hard, your red aura was the strong one. And now it's faded again and the green one is dominant. Each of your auras must be connected with one of your lives...how curious..."

Bernard was rolling his eyes. Maggie sat next to him and patted his leg affectionately. "Oh ye of little faith," she said to him a little smugly. She turned to Harry. "Seeing auras is the one thing I do that he doesn't completely believe..."

"Let's say 'don't believe at all,' so we're absolutely accurate," he drawled.

Maggie ignored her husband. "How much do you know about this other life? Did you find out about it through a medium? That's something I don't do; no séances, no talking to the dead. I'm just not a conduit between this world and the next."

He shook his head. "No. I've--I've just recently become aware of the other life. In fact, you're the only people I've told. I'd like to keep it quiet."

Maggie was still looking at Harry. "Fascinating...But," she said, "your auras--both of them--are still a little black. You're still holding something back."

Harry grimaced. "If you don't think *I'm* the one who's crackers, I have to admit something: You know when I said that your, um, unusual abilities are something you have in common with your sister? Well, I can do, er, strange things too."

She looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes, you can, can't you? That makes so much sense! That also explains why your auras are so strong..." She looked like she had another thought. "Wait! If my birthday is November first, that means I'm a Scorpio, not a Capricorn!"

"You also don't know where you were born. Didn't you say you also need that to do a proper chart?"

"Yes...Do you know where I was born? From that other life?"

He nodded. "You were born just outside a village called Ottery St. Catchpole."

"Ottery St. What?" Bernard said suddenly. Maggie hit him lightly with the back of her hand.

"Oh you--there are loads of villages across England with names like that. Where is it?"

Harry shrugged. "Sorry--I've never been there in this life. And in the other one...I was taken there, but I never had to work out how to go on my own. So I have no idea."

She strode purposefully into the kitchen and came back with two newspapers; she started rifling through the pages and found what she was looking for in one of them. "Here we go!" she said, holding up one of them. "Yesterday's copy of the *Sun*. The birthday horoscope I worked out for people born on November first: *This year will be full of surprises. A family reunion will help you to understand yourself better. Not everyone will be glad to see you; don't expect to be universally popular. Set your sights low; you are habitually disappointed when you expect too much. You have unique abilities that set you apart from the rest of the world and make you a force to be reckoned with in business. Those who are in relationships should expect that bond to deepen in times of adversity, while the unattached will have good luck when friends act as matchmakers.*"

She gazed at what she'd written for a minute after she was done reading it to them. She looked up at Harry. "Well, I suppose that sounds about right. How odd. I'm twenty-four now and I didn't even know it." She put the Thursday newspaper down and picked up another one. "Today's horoscope that I wrote for Scorpions: *Take in a stray that follows you home. The domino effect will change your life forever. Careful not to startle others as it could have disastrous results. You can be self-involved, but today you have permission. Allow yourself to be the curious cat.*"

She grinned. "I've never felt that Capricorn was right for me, and now I know why! Oh, thank you if only for that! You've given me my birthday!" She looked at the paper again, grinning, even though it wasn't the rosiest horoscope Harry had ever heard. The part about taking in a stray was uncanny, though, and it wasn't as though she knew she was a Scorpio when she wrote it.

He took the paper from her and stared at his own horoscope, thinking about what he'd done the day before. It was amazing; the horoscope for Leo was spot on for him too, and he'd never thought that when reading these things before. He looked up at her.

"So--you can really do this stuff? You're serious; you're not faking it."

She bristled. "No, I'm not faking it! Honestly, I am so tired of--"

"I'm sorry. It's just that--I always used to fake my Divination homework. I was hopeless at it. I just kept predicting my untimely, gruesome death, and the teacher was happy."

She looked at him shrewdly. "Divination homework?"

Harry just realized how peculiar this must have sounded. "Yes. Remember how I mentioned that your sister and I also have strange abilities? Well--we go to a special school for people like us. It's, um, a very progressive school..."

She raised her eyebrows. "I'll say. I wish I'd gone to a school like that."

He grinned at her. "It's fantastic! You would have been brilliant in Divination; they probably would have had you *teaching* the lessons! Everyone in your family went there. That's where your parents met, and your brothers all went, too. Your oldest brother Bill and your younger brother Percy were both Head Boy. And Charlie was captain of the Quidditch team. There are four houses, and the house teams compete against each other. I'm captain of my house team. And Ginny's on her house team too. We're in different houses. Your brother Ron is the captain of their house team."

"There are boys and girls on the same teams? That *is* a progressive school. Hm..."

Harry wasn't sure whether he'd said too much. He'd managed to tell her a good bit about both the school and her family without once mentioning magic. Hopefully when she eventually learned about being a witch, she would take it in stride. He thought it might help to get her to Hermione's. And Hermione had books now that she could show Maggie...

"So, um, do you want to go see her? We could call first; my friend wrote her phone number on the directions I was using."

She'd been staring at the horoscope again, but now she looked up at him as though she'd forgotten he was in her flat. "Oh, yes, of course. What's the number? What's her name?" When he told her Hermione's name, she stopped what she was doing. "Hermione Granger? You *know* her?"

"Actually, we just met earlier this week. Ginny's over at her place now. They're getting acquainted."

She grinned. "Well, here I go..." She punched the numbers on the phone, then pressed a button for the speaker, so Harry could hear and talk too. He heard the phone ringing, then after a few moments, Hermione's voice answering.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Hermione Granger?"

"Who is calling, please?" Hermione's voice had become wary.

"My name is Maggie Parrish, and I'm calling because--"

"Maggie Parrish! I *don't* want to talk to you. I've seen what you do to people who do. I've read the horrible way you dissect their lives, second-guessing all their decisions, and I will not sit still and let you--"

"Shut up!" Maggie yelled at her. "I'm not calling you to put you under a microscope. Harry Potter is here in my flat."

"Harry's there? Why?"

"Hello, Hermione," he called into the speaker. "I got a little lost," he said sheepishly.

"Lost? I gave you perfectly good directions." He heard a familiar annoyance in her voice. "Did you switch trains where I told you?"

"Er, no. I saw Maggie and I--followed her home."

"What?" That was Ginny's voice now; apparently Hermione had a speaker phone as well. "I thought I was the only one you stalked..."

"Calm down, Gin. There was a good reason for it. Listen, Hermione, can I bring her over to your flat? I want her to meet Ginny."

"All right. But what about Dean?"

"Actually, I've had another idea for how to get the others all together in one place. I'll tell you once I get there, all right? How's Ginny doing?"

"I'm fine," came her voice out of the speaker. "As long as people don't talk about me like I'm not here..."

Maggie chuckled and whispered to Harry, "I like her."

"We'll be over soon. Maggie will make sure I don't get lost."

They all said goodbye and Maggie went to talk to her husband. They both seemed to be satisfied that Harry wasn't a nefarious character who was trying to lure her to his flat for some dreadful purpose; she had been reassured by hearing Hermione and Ginny on the phone.

When they were ready to go, Bernard kissed her, and Harry pretended he was looking at a print on the wall near the door. He was still holding the Friday newspaper, which he folded and put in his pocket. Bernard held his

wife's slim waist lightly, and she clung to him for a second before letting him go. Harry swallowed, thinking of him and Ginny.

Using the directions Hermione had drawn up for getting to Dean's house, Maggie managed to work out how to get to the flat Hermione shared with her teacher. In no time, it seemed, they were knocking on the door and Hermione was opening it. Maggie started forward, then stopped when she saw that no one would ever mistake her and Hermione for being dead ringers.

Hermione also froze when she saw Maggie. "You're Maggie Parrish?"

Maggie smiled ruefully. "Well, I'll assume from your reaction that you don't watch me on television." Hermione shook her head dumbly; Harry could tell that Hermione was taking in the striking resemblance between Maggie and Ginny. He muttered in her ear, "*Don't mention magic.*" She nodded, ushering them into the entrance hall, then into the living room, where Ginny was. She looked up and gave Harry a smile that touched his heart, but it disappeared when she saw Maggie step out from behind him. Her face dropped and she looked terrified.

"Harry; what or who is that?" she whispered, standing and backing away.

He grinned. "You'll never guess who I spotted on the train! Your sister Peggy! Only she goes by Margaret now. Well, Maggie, actually. I couldn't believe how much she looks like you..."

"Sister?" she gasped. Harry heard a rushing sound in his ears as he realized the magnitude of his blunder; damn! He suddenly realized that he didn't know whether Ginny knew about Annie and Peggy. It certainly appeared that she didn't. In the other life, Ginny found out after she came up from the Chamber of Secrets and her mother blurted it out. Ginny had never been in the Chamber in this life. This had gone dreadfully wrong. Ginny stared at her sister, openmouthed, then at Harry. With an inarticulate cry, she ran from the room; they heard her open the door of the flat and run into the corridor, then down the stairs.

After standing frozen for a moment, Harry cried, "Ginny!" and then sprinted after her. He was getting better at running, but she was also fast and had had a good head start. He'd noticed at school that she was very fast at going downstairs; she could really get up a rhythm and go pattering down an enormous staircase in nothing flat. Harry was a flight behind her, hitting the ground floor a moment after she'd pushed the exterior door open and had collided with a man walking past the building. Both Ginny and the man staggered, but she recovered quickly, dashing toward the street.

"Ginny!" he called. She paused for a split second, and that's when it happened; the driver blew the horn first, unfortunately, and threw on the

brakes second, but the car was still moving, and he couldn't stop it from striking her. She was thrown up on the hood, then rolled onto the street in front of the car's wheels. After that she was very still.

Harry flew through the door and to her side, crouching next to her, calling her name some more. The driver was getting out of his car, coming round to look, a dreadful expression on his face.

"She just ran out into the street!" he said with a catch in his voice. "I tried to stop..."

Harry could feel a pulse, but it was weak. She had a bruise on her forehead and he was afraid to touch her, to find out what else might be wrong. Hermione was at his elbow quickly, while someone cried out that they were calling the police and an ambulance. Harry gazed down at Ginny's inert form, tears prickling behind his eyelids.

"All my fault," he choked. "She didn't understand about cars and things...I shouldn't have sprung this on her..."

Hermione put her hand on his arm. "You said not to mention magic," she whispered to him, "but isn't there something magical you can do to help her?"

He shook his head. "I'm not trained in that. I need to get her back to our school. That's where she needs to be. I can't let Muggles get near her..."

Hermione grimaced. "And how will you get her back?"

"I'm not sure. It's about an hour between the village hall and the entrance to the secret passage in the school. And I would have to get her to the Leaky Cauldron first."

"Well, usually after something like this, you have to worry about internal injuries. She could be bleeding inside. You'd better move fast."

"I can only go so quickly--" he started to say, when he had a sudden idea. "Listen," he said to her softly; there was a crowd of people standing about now, and Harry could hear a siren working its way through the traffic a few blocks away. Maggie had reached them, panting, and was leaning over Ginny with concern, smoothing hair from her brow. While she was distracted, Harry whispered to Hermione, "I know of a spell that *could* possibly get me back to school very fast, but I've never done it before. I might not be able to. Cover for me; I'm going to run back inside to try it."

She nodded, bending over Ginny and stroking her arm lightly. Harry looked at Maggie. "I'll be right back." She didn't question this; he ran into Hermione's building. He worked at slowing down his breathing once he was indoors and couldn't be seen by anyone. Taking his wand out of its

long pocket, he attempted to focus, but it was difficult with the sound of the sirens getting closer and closer. He closed his eyes and tried to be completely aware of everything his body was doing; he thought about moving very, very fast, pictured himself running like the wind....He swished his wand through the air and pointed it at his own head, then spoke in a firm, clear voice.

"*Tempus fugit.*"

He looked around; he didn't feel any different. He listened for the sirens; he couldn't let Ginny be taken to a Muggle hospital! They weren't supposed to be in London. But suddenly, he realized that he not only wasn't hearing sirens, he wasn't hearing any noise at all. The world was utterly still. He turned and opened the door.

He stepped out into the street, into an eerily silent universe populated by uncanny statues. The statue of the driver of the car that had struck Ginny was standing with one hand on the hood, looking down at her, a tear that had been streaking down his face frozen in position next to his nose. There was a Hermione statue, and a Maggie statue and a prone Ginny statue, still just as bruised-looking. Harry's heart was in his throat. He looked up and down the street; not a soul moved anywhere; the wind didn't even rustle anything. Harry was moving between seconds, between milliseconds, and everyone else in the world appeared to be standing still.

He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd done it! He glanced at Ginny. She'd be safe now; he could get her back to Hogwarts and it would be as though almost no time had passed for her. If she had internal bleeding, it wouldn't progress while he was getting her to Madam Pomfrey.

He returned to Hermione's flat, finding some paper and a pencil to write her a note explaining what he was doing.

Dear Hermione,

It worked. I'm taking Ginny back. I know I said not to mention you-know-what to Maggie, but now I can't be here to talk to her about it. I know you just found out about yourself a few days ago, but if you can find a way to tell her that she is the same, that would be very helpful. You can tell her how barking mad you thought I was when I told you; perhaps that would help her.

I had an idea for getting Alicia, Dean and Justin together in the same place so we could tell them. You mentioned in one of your letters that you are doing a concert in London on December 28. That is during our Christmas holiday. Perhaps you can send personal invitations and tickets to them for the

concert? It's worth a try. You'll need to send tickets to me too; I'll let you know how many when you return.

Thanks for talking to Maggie, if you decide you can handle that. I'll contact you later to tell you how Ginny is.

Harry

Harry ran back outside with the note and carefully wrapped Hermione's hand around it. Then he gently removed Ginny from underneath Maggie's hand and picked her up with his left arm under her knees and his right arm around her back, her head pillowed on his chest. It was disconcerting not to feel her heart beating, but he knew that if he stayed in this state, her heart would not beat again for what would seem to him decades, and yet she would still be alive. He staggered away from the car which had struck her; when he reached the tube station, he stared going down the stairs, but he realized that he couldn't take the train while he was moving between split seconds. He staggered back up to the street with her body. He would have to carry her all the way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Luckily, she was as light as he remembered her. He thought of taking her to Madam Pomfrey after he and Ron had discovered her with Malfoy in the Potions dungeon. Fortunately, she wasn't really hurt that time; now she was, and her life depended on his getting her to Hogwarts.

He stopped to rest periodically, brushing her hair gently out of her face. He was enormously relieved when he finally reached the wizarding pub. When he entered, the pub patrons and Tom were frozen in mid-drink, mid-sentence, and, in Tom's case, in mid-pour, an arc of amber liquid connecting a brown bottle to a small glass on the bar in front of him.

Harry put Ginny down in a chair near the fire so he could retrieve the envelope of Floo powder from his pocket. Then he realized that this probably wouldn't work if he was still moving faster than the rest of the world. He shouldn't combine magics that way; it was too unpredictable and risky. He took a deep breath and tried to act very quickly. He took the spell off himself, and the people around him in the pub started moving again; a witch sitting at the next table pointed at Harry and Ginny, a shocked look on her face. To her, it would have seemed that they had appeared out of nowhere. He tossed some Floo powder in the fire and cried, "Hogsmeade village hall!"

He clutched Ginny's body to him, made her as much a part of him as possible, until finally, they fell out of the grating into the backstage area in the hall. Harry quickly performed the *Tempus fugit* spell again, then picked her up and started to enter the passage behind the wardrobe which led to the fourth floor corridor at the castle. Then he stopped and thought about whether this was really the smartest thing to do. It took about twenty minutes longer to get to the fourth floor corridor than it did to

simply walk back to the castle from the village hall, and the infirmary was also quite close to the entrance hall, while it was dismally far from the fourth-floor corridor with the large mirror. He decided that since he was traveling between milliseconds anyway, he didn't need to use the secret passage. He could walk right out in the middle of the High Street and down the road to the castle without anyone noticing a thing.

So he did just that. He still had to stop frequently to rest, but once he was within a half-mile of the front doors of the castle, he didn't stop once. He carried her into the entrance hall and looked around; the castle seemed quite deserted. Had no one above third year opted out of the trip to Hogsmeade? Then he wondered how he was going to explain to Madam Pomfrey what had happened to Ginny...

His mind went blank; he looked up at the marble stairs leading to the hospital wing. Think, Potter, think...And then, as he looked intently at the stairs, it came to him. No one was around; they wouldn't just suddenly see Harry and Ginny appear out of thin air. He set her down at the foot of the stairs, and before he took the spell off himself he bent down and kissed her brow, her cheeks, and very lightly, her lips.

"It will be all right," he whispered to her. He took the spell off himself and immediately felt a draft coming into the entrance hall from the open front door. He leaned down to listen to Ginny's heart, and when he was satisfied, he scooped her up again and carried her up the stairs, not stopping until he reached the door of the infirmary.

He opened the door noisily, banging it against the wall, and he called out, "Madam Pomfrey! Come quickly!"

She hustled out of her office, looking nonplussed until she saw Harry carrying Ginny. "Over here!" she ordered, patting one of the beds. Harry followed her and put Ginny down carefully. "Now--what happened?"

"I'm--I'm not sure. I found her at the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall."

She nodded and began to examine Ginny. When she passed her wand over Ginny's midsection she looked very concerned. It was glowing with a strange purple light. She pushed past Harry and strode to her office, returning with a corked vial containing a viscous-looking magenta potion which emitted a lavender mist when the vial was uncorked. Pomfrey carefully poured it between Ginny's pale lips.

She gazed at the watch she wore around her neck on a pendant, which appeared upside down to Harry. After a few minutes, she waved her wand over Ginny again, muttering words Harry didn't catch. When she was done the wand glowed pale blue instead of purple. Madam Pomfrey breathed a sigh of relief. Then she looked up at Harry.

"Suppose you tell me what *really* happened, Potter."

* * * * *

McGonagall gave him that gimlet eye that he remembered so well. Fortunately, he hadn't had to see it directed at him since his fight with the twins on his first day back. He swallowed. What had Pomfrey told the headmistress? he wondered.

"Well, Potter? What do you have to say about Miss Weasley's condition?"

Harry felt himself breaking out in a sweat. *Calm down*, he thought. Getting so nervous she can see it isn't going to help. "I found her," he said in a choked voice, "at the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall. I had just come back from the Quidditch pitch, since I wasn't permitted to go into the village today--"

"Ah," she said knowingly, nodding. "The Quidditch pitch. I see. That's where you were. That makes sense. And then?"

What did she mean by that? "And then when I came in the doors, I saw her just lying there..."

She looked at his face shrewdly. "Are you sure, Potter? For someone who just 'found' her, you're looking terribly--guilty. Is there nothing you wish to add?"

He looked back at her, the wheels in his mind spinning. Finally, he knew what he could say to explain the unmistakable guilty look he evidently had on his face. He put his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Professor. It's all my fault. Ginny being like this..."

Now she put her fingers together, nodding. "Go on, Potter." He lifted his face to her again.

"You may or may not know that I--I used to follow Ginny around the castle."

She nodded grimly. "I was aware of that. Continue."

"And then--near the end of last term, I decided--well, I decided that I'd been stupid and pathetic and she was never going to give me the time of day and I gave up. I forced myself to stop thinking about her, and I stopped following her. I haven't followed her since the new term began. And she and my sister have become friends now, so--it's just a bit awkward, seeing them together. And now that this has happened, I can't help feeling that if I hadn't been so defeatist, if I hadn't given up on her--then I would have *been* there, I could have kept this from happening, or

taken her to the hospital wing sooner. Who knows how long she was lying there?"

Professor McGonagall nodded, her face relaxed and sympathetic now, and Harry knew that she'd believed the story he'd just told her. He really *did* feel responsible, of course, so he no longer had to worry about his face betraying his feelings. And she was apparently finding his reasoning plausible.

"Potter, your job at this school is to be a student, not Miss Weasley's bodyguard. You cannot hold yourself responsible for this." Harry tried to smile feebly at her; he hadn't had that much contact with Professor McGonagall since September first, and he was gratified that she was talking to a Slytherin student in her office with no apparent bias against him. He noticed that Professor McGonagall looked very troubled.

"Madam Pomfrey *did* say something perplexing," she said. "Miss Weasley's injuries are not at all consistent with a tumble down a flight of stairs-- even a long flight of marble stairs. Pomfrey did her apprenticeship in Edinburgh, you know, and had to work on witches and wizards who were not unaccustomed to a Muggle city, and unaware of how fast Muggle automobiles could travel. That was over fifty years ago, mind you, but there are always some people who will drive dangerously fast in the city. She says she saw Miss Weasley's sort of injuries many times when she was in Edinburgh; they are consistent with a person being struck by a Muggle car. She also says that you did in fact find her very quickly; she estimates that Miss Weasley couldn't have been lying there more than a few minutes when you came upon her. Naturally, she could not really have been struck by an automobile, as the nearest Muggle village is several hours away from here, even by broomstick. The question becomes: what at Hogwarts could cause a person to suffer these sorts of injuries?"

Harry swallowed and tried to look confused; it wasn't that hard. "Another perplexing thing," Professor McGonagall continued, "is that there were various strange articles stuck to Miss Weasley's clothing. I recognized a cigarette end, a piece of gum, and a bit of shiny paper with the name of a Muggle sweet on it. There was also a great deal of dirt on the back of her clothes, the sort you find on a Macadam road. It was almost as if she was struck by an automobile on a paved Muggle street, then magically transported back here seconds later. The problem with that, of course, is that--"

--you can't Apparate anywhere on the grounds of Hogwarts," Harry said mechanically. Years of conditioning from the Hermione in his other life kicked in suddenly, and when he looked up at a surprised McGonagall, he stuttered a bit. "S-sorry to interrupt, Professor."

She looked at him appraisingly. "Have you been reading *Hogwarts, A History*, Potter?"

He swallowed. "Just a little, ma'am," he lied.

She beamed with approval. "Glad to hear it. Thumping good read, if I do say so myself. In general, I'd say your performance this year has been a pleasure to see. I've been getting nothing but glowing reports of your work from all of your teachers. It's a pity you're not a prefect..." she trailed off; Harry wondered whether she knew about the changed O.W.L. letter and the reason *why* he wasn't a prefect. She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "I understand you've been down at the Quidditch pitch most mornings. Have you by any chance been receiving some extra tuition?"

Harry frowned. "No. I've just--I've been running in the mornings. Around the pitch. And doing some other exercises. Just keeping fit. Nothing special. Rather boring, really." What did she suspect? Her face reorganized itself into a blank, friendly mask.

"At any rate, it's a good thing you were in the entrance hall when you were. Miss Weasley is very lucky, according to Madam Pomfrey. She is being very cautious with her. She may be unconscious for several days, perhaps even longer. Madam Pomfrey will be monitoring her all day, and various professors will be taking turns at night. We will also be asking her close friends to help during the day, to give Poppy some small breaks. Miss Weasley was gravely injured, and will very likely be in hospital for some time."

Harry felt stricken, and knew that the expression probably showed on his face. "I-I'm glad I found her when I did," he whispered. "Could I--could I go see her?"

She smiled indulgently at him. "Yes, Harry. You may." He knew she had softened toward him since she was using his first name.

He didn't need to be told twice. When he left the headmistress' office, he ran as fast as he could to the hospital wing. Before he'd gone to McGonagall's office, he'd made a trip up to the owlery to send a message to Hermione confirming that he and Ginny had arrived at Hogwarts. He hadn't heard back from her yet about whether she'd been up to telling Maggie about being a witch. He still felt guilty about laying that on Hermione when she'd just found out herself, but there was no helping it, with Ginny injured...

He reached the infirmary quickly and burst in the door; Madam Pomfrey looked upset at first, then relaxed when she saw it was him. She waved him over and he stood uncertainly, looking down at Ginny's pale face and then at Madam Pomfrey's concerned, wrinkled one.

"How is she?" he asked softly. She shook her head.

"Stable. But I'm worried. That head injury isn't going to allow her to awake for some time. And I want to keep monitoring her for internal bleeding."

"Can I--can I sit with her?"

She smiled at him indulgently. "Of course. But let me teach you something first," she said and proceeded to show him the charm she'd used earlier that had told her that Ginny's problem was internal bleeding. When Harry performed the charm, his wand glowed with a pale blue light, as Madam Pomfrey's had the last time he'd seen her do it. "If it turns purplish, or worse, red, you come get me, understand? You don't need to do it constantly; every fifteen minutes or so should do. How long do you plan to stay?"

He gazed at Ginny, his throat tight. "As long as you'll let me." She nodded; probably everyone knows that I used to follow her around, Harry thought. That sort of thing would be common knowledge.

He glanced up at the clock on the wall so he would know how soon to check her again. Ginny had also cracked a couple of ribs, but they were already mending nicely. "I just can't understand the things on her clothes...."

Harry didn't look at her. He sat in a chair pulled up to Ginny's bedside and took her left hand in his. She probably wouldn't wake up any time soon, but he wanted to be by her side when she did. He couldn't believe how stupid he'd been, spring Maggie on her....

Every fifteen minutes he checked her with his wand; he breathed a sigh of relief each time it glowed pale blue. Harry heard Madam Pomfrey bustling about in the apothecary; he didn't turn around when the door to the infirmary opened, but the moment he heard a familiar voice, he jerked up and hastily took his hand away from Ginny's.

"Potter! What's going on? What's happened to our sister?" Ron came striding into the room ahead of Charlie and they were both at her bedside in trice. "Professor Black came flying down to the village to find us. Get away from her! I thought you were leaving her alone, and the first chance you get to be with her when she's unconscious and can't tell you to sod off, you're sitting here *touching her hand!*"

"Ron!" Charlie said sharply; it was a good thing, Harry thought, that Charlie didn't have to teach his brother.

Harry swallowed, unable to respond. Madam Pomfrey came bustling into the room. "Weasley!" she said, addressing Ron. "I'll thank you to keep

your voice down in my infirmary! Potter is responsible for bringing your sister here before she could bleed to death internally! If anyone has a right to sit here and hold her hand, I'd say it's him!" Harry was shocked; he'd never heard Madam Pomfrey say such a thing before. Ron looked slightly abashed at being addressed in this way, but not so much that he backed down.

"I don't want that Slytherin near my sister," he growled, looking at Ginny.

"Did you completely ignore everything I said? Potter saved her life! Now, you are to report to the Headmistress. You too, Professor Weasley. She is waiting for you to be present before she calls your parents. Professor McGonagall can tell you everything you need to know. In the meantime, if Potter wants to stay, he has my permission. Since *I* am in charge in this infirmary, that is all that matters!"

She looked at Ron, daring him to challenge her authority, and he immediately backed down, but he gave Harry a good glare before he turned to go, Charlie's hand on his shoulder. Charlie looked back at Harry, sympathy in his gaze. *Sorry about that*, he mouthed at Harry, who nodded back at him, his lips drawn into a line. When they had closed the door, Madam Pomfrey turned kindly to Harry and said softly, "How is she?"

He looked down at Ginny's expressionless face. "The same." Madam Pomfrey nodded.

"That's good. Can you stay a little longer?"

"Of course."

He sat and took Ginny's hand again; when Pomfrey was gone, he raised it to his lips. "I'm here, Ginny," he whispered to her. "I'm not going anywhere."

He had only checked her with his wand once more when Ron and Charlie returned. Harry heard the door open and close, but he didn't turn, nor did he bother taking Ginny's hand from his own. He heard Ron walk to her bed, then looked up at him when he stopped and stood on the other side of it, taking up Ginny's other hand. Charlie followed, but this time he came to stand near Harry, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder and saying softly, "Thanks, Harry."

Harry looked up at his friend and teacher and nodded. He knew what he meant. Then he looked back at Ginny, feeling the comforting pressure of the hand on his shoulder; he knew that Charlie was not all that thrilled that Harry had followed Ginny around, and it even seemed to Harry that he might originally have befriended him to try to keep an eye on his sister's stalker. But that friendship had grown to have a life of its own, and Charlie had never once requested that Harry stop following Ginny.

Ignoring the two of them, Ron said to his sister, "Mum and dad will be here soon, Ginny." His voice shook a little. "Well, Mum will, anyway. Dad was about to Apparate to the village, but another emergency came up at work." He sat on the edge of the bed, his voice soft, gazing at her face as though she could really hear and understand him. "He's trying to figure out whether someone has made an illegal Portkey; a woman in London was hit by a car and disappeared into thin air. And a Muggle-born witch was there too; it's possible they may need to get the Accidental Magic Reversal squad out there, if she's the one who did it. It's a big mess; there are about a dozen Muggles whose memories need altering. Not to mention the Muggle-born witch." Harry groaned inwardly; he'd hoped to cover his tracks better than this, but of course, Maggie and Hermione weren't the only ones who would have noticed that Ginny had vanished. Other people had been milling about after she'd been hit. What if they modified Hermione's memory and she forgot that she was a witch again? She'd wonder why on earth she had an owl, for a start, not to mention the magic books. Good grief, Harry thought. What a mess...

"Potter," Ron said suddenly. Harry looked up at him; he hadn't reprimanded him for taking Ginny's hand this time. Perhaps it was because Charlie was standing next to him. Harry didn't speak. Ron's voice quavered and he sounded reluctant. "Thanks. For being there. McGonagall told me what you said." He looked down at his sister. "I never thought I'd say this, but I kind of wish you were still stalking her, too. It never occurred to me that could give her some kind of protection..."

Harry grimaced. "But you wish I weren't a Slytherin."

"Well, of course," Ron said, without hesitation. Harry clamped his mouth shut and breathed through his nose, trying to control his anger.

"That's all you see when you look at me: a Slytherin. You might be interested to know that I'm also a decent human being. If I'd found anyone in the condition Ginny was in, I'd have brought them up here and I'd still be sitting with them."

Charlie patted his shoulder again. "Of course you would, Harry. I know what sort of person you are." He looked pointedly at his younger brother, his eyebrows raised.

Ron looked at Charlie, abashed, then at Harry, and mumbled, "Sorry." Then he went back to watching Ginny. Harry was torn between telling Ron off for being such a house-bigot and wanting to be friends with him again. It would have been nice if he and Ron and Draco and Charlie could all hang out together...and Jamie and Ginny, too. He remembered the Ron from his other life; the Ron who assumed that everyone in Slytherin was evil, the Ron who reacted negatively to the news that Hagrid was half-giant and who was very, very alarmed by Harry being a Parselmouth, and didn't subscribe to Hermione's theory that house-elf liberation was a good

thing. Ron was really no different in this life, Harry thought. He just hasn't had me and Hermione to be good influences on him...

"For instance," Harry said to him, "I don't think it's right that Hogwarts no longer takes Muggle-born students. Do you think it's right?"

Ron shrugged. "It's the law."

"But is it a *just* law? Do you think it's right for Muggle-born witches and wizards not to know who they are? *What* they are? To have their memory altered all the time if they make something happen? Wouldn't there likely be fewer cases of accidental magic if all magical people *knew* that they were magic?"

Ron frowned at him. "Since when do Slytherins give a damn about Muggle-borns?"

"Ron--" his brother said warningly again.

Harry bristled. "This Slytherin has a mum who's Muggle-born."

Ron's eyes opened wide. "Oh, right. Evans. What a mind-bender that was! I mean--well, look at *her*, and look at *you*--"

"Oh, thanks very much for that," Harry drawled. He elbowed Charlie, who had started to laugh, then stifled it.

"You know what I mean."

"Well, people always say that all I got from my mum are my eyes, that otherwise I look just like my father."

Ron looked confused. "You don't look anything like Snape."

"He's my stepfather, stupid. My father was James Potter."

"He was in seventh year when I was a first year," Charlie told Ron. "Gryffindor Quidditch captain. A Chaser. Like you," he added pointedly. Ron squirmed a bit.

"Oh. right. Snape married to Evans...that's a mind-bender too." Ron shook his head in wonder. "Snape's a lucky son-of-a--"

"Watch it," Harry warned in a low growl. He tried not to notice Charlie's sly grin. Ron apologized again, not very sincerely.

"Now, your sister--I can see now that she's your mum's daughter."

"Yeah. All she got from our father was his hair color, combined with a little of mum's." He couldn't help his mouth twisting into a smile as he looked at Ron. "You think my sister's pretty, don't you?"

Ron opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, making his brother laugh out loud. When he did speak, he didn't answer Harry's question. "Why do I think that if I say, 'yes,' you'll look on it as an excuse to pull out your wand, and if I say 'no,' you'll do the same thing?"

"Now boys," Charlie said, although he was smiling. "No dueling in the infirmary..."

Harry laughed. "Paranoid, aren't we?"

Ron laughed too. "Well, I do the same thing. If a bloke looks at Ginny, I notice. And if someone were to insult her, they'd also have to answer to me."

"And me," Charlie said, sounding miffed.

Harry quieted, gazing at her face again. "Why would anyone insult her?" he asked softly.

Ron and Charlie didn't have an answer for him. They were all silent for a few minutes, sitting companionably with her, and Harry felt unaccountably happy, considering that Ginny was still in grave danger. Just being able to sit quietly in the same room with Ron was a big step. When the door to the infirmary swung open, all three of them whirled around. It was Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"How is she?" Mrs. Weasley wanted to know, dashing across the room to be at her daughter's side. Harry and Charlie backed off to make room for her. Mrs. Weasley didn't notice them; no one in the world existed for her except her daughter.

"Sorry we took so long, boys," Arthur Weasley said to his sons, "but the moment I arrived at the office and they told me about the crisis, I told your mother to wait for me so we could come together. Bill and Percy and the twins will be by later."

"Why did you have mum wait?" Ron looked puzzled.

His father sighed. "Because there seems to be a connection to the London situation," Arthur Weasley said evenly.

"A connection?" Ron squeaked, incredulous. Mr. Weasley looked at Harry.

"Are you Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Professor McGonagall told us what you did." He extended his hand and Harry took it. "Thank you," Ginny's father said to him sincerely. Somehow, in this life, Arthur Weasley had a firmer air of authority than in Harry's other life, where that authority frequently splintered into absurdity (Harry thought of his plug collection again). Perhaps with two departments to run at the Ministry, this Mr. Weasley had precious little time for hobbies or absurdity. Harry had actually rather liked that side of Mr. Weasley; it reminded him of Dumbledore.

"I'm glad I was there, sir." Now Mrs. Weasley pulled him to her in a hug and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"So are we. So are we," she said pulling back from him, her eyes shining. She was as Harry remembered, smelling like Floo powder and fresh-baked bread.

"Do you mind?" Mr. Weasley said quietly to Harry. "We need to discuss some private family matters." Harry shook his head and moved toward the door.

"Can you tell Madam Pomfrey I'll be back?" Ron nodded to him. Harry gave him a small smile; maybe he and Ron *could* be friends in this life.

When he was in the corridor again, Harry looked down, realizing that he was still in the coat he'd created by transfiguring his school robes, and the Invisibility Cloak was still in his pocket. Before he'd shut the infirmary door completely, he ducked into the corridor, put the cloak on, then returned, closing the door slowly and quietly. Harry thought it might be possible that Mr. Weasley wanted to discuss family business; but he had a feeling that he was really going to discuss the "crisis" in London.

"Do either of you know where Ginny was today?" he asked his sons, sounding rather like a police officer. "Did she go into Hogsmeade with you?"

Ron shook his head. "No; we asked her to, but she said she had a lot of assignments to do. I thought that was strange, since most of the professors take it easy on us when there's a Hogsmeade weekend, but I didn't argue."

Charlie looked uncomfortable, as though he wished he *had* argued with her. "Nor did I."

"So, as far as you know, she was here in the castle?"

Ron shrugged. "Where else?"

"How about on a London street, getting hit by a car?"

"*What?*" her brothers said in unison.

Mr. Weasley looked down at his daughter sadly. "A girl meeting Ginny's description was hit by a car in Fulham. Then she vanished into thin air. There were Muggles all around who saw her there one second, lying in the street, then she was just--gone. At first we thought it was an illegal Portkey, but now--"

"*What?*" Charlie said, putting his arm around his mother's shoulders.

"Well, we did some digging and discovered that the accident occurred right in front of the home of a Muggle-born witch. When our people ran some tests on the accident site, there was no Portkey signature. Once we found out about the witch living there, we did some tests on her flat; no one was home. There were no signs of magic there, accidental or otherwise." Harry gave a mental sigh of relief; thank goodness he had not helped Hermione to buy a wand. "However, right inside the door to the witch's building, there was a magic signature. A spell, done with a wand. A very obscure spell. Dark magic. I can't tell you its name; it's classified."

Dark magic! Harry thought. Of course dark magic! his brain responded. You should have known. Something as powerful as that! It was because of Voldemort that he knew about the *Tempus fugit* spell, after all. He should have known it was dark magic. On his way back to the castle with Ginny, he had wondered why Dumbledore hadn't suggested that he and Hermione use it to save Sirius and Buckbeak, but now he knew. Dumbledore would never advocate the use of dark magic. Even as he was going through Hermione's things, trying to find some paper and a pen for the note he'd left, Harry had thought that it was a good thing he had honorable intentions; someone whose intentions weren't completely honorable could do some very nefarious things using that spell...

And suddenly, he knew; he knew how the Weasley girls had been taken from the playground in Ottery St. Catchpole! *The Tempus fugit spell*. Of course. It made perfect sense.

"What does this spell do?" Ron wanted to know.

His father frowned. "When a person puts this spell on himself, he can move so fast that he is going between split-seconds. It has been used occasionally by dark wizards to commit horrible crimes, but we haven't seen it for years..."

Harry suddenly realized that Mr. Weasley must know already that his daughters had been taken using this spell; he and dozens of Aurors had gone over Ottery St. Catchpole with a fine-toothed comb. One of them must have discovered the signature of the *Tempus fugit* spell at the

swings where the girls had last been seen. Harry swallowed. *He* had used dark magic. It was to save Ginny, but it was dark magic all the same...

"Why don't dark wizards use it more often?" Ron wanted to know.

"It's very dangerous. You can put yourself into an early grave. Outwardly there is no clue, but inside one's body...When one is using this spell, the inner workings of one's body age ten-thousand times faster than normal."

Ten-thousand times! Harry thought. He was unsure how long he'd taken to get Ginny back to Hogwarts. It had felt like somewhere between two and three hours. That was--he did the math quickly in his head, rounding off the numbers--almost *three years*. He'd aged his bones and internal organs an additional *three years* to get Ginny back. Granted, wizards lived longer than Muggles, but still...

"Wow," Ron said. "Why would anyone use a spell like that very much?"

His father shrugged. "I don't know. It's possible some people have used it without knowing the downside. And while the spell itself isn't illegal, it's usually used for masking illegal activity. No one uses it for good."

Harry bristled; I used it to save Ginny! he thought. But he could understand Mr. Weasley assuming this; it was a spell waiting to be abused.

"Do you have any idea who performed the spell?" Charlie wanted to know.

His father shook his head. "None. We're wondering about the Muggle-born witch, though. Like I said, the signature was just inside the entrance to her building. And when we checked her flat we also discovered that she has an owl. Which might not mean anything; after all, there were no magic signatures in her flat, and I've heard of some Muggles who have pet owls. We couldn't spend a lot of time looking around, had to Apparate out. The witch's flatmate was coming home."

Charlie looked thoughtful. "Did you find the witch?"

"No, and that's another disturbing piece of the puzzle. Plus, some of the Muggles who were there said that there were *two* girls who looked like Ginny; the one who was hit by the car was lying on the ground, and the other one was leaning over her. The Muggle-born witch was also bending over her. Then the girl who had been struck by the car disappeared. And apparently, the witch didn't return to her flat."

"You don't think *she* did the dark magic?" Ron suggested.

His father frowned. "Unlikely."

Ron looked very perplexed. "So are you saying that Ginny was in London today, that she was hit by a car, and that someone who used this dark magic returned her to Hogwarts and put her in the entrance hall, where she was found by Potter?"

His father looked grim. "It certainly looks that way."

Ron paced back and forth. "Does McGonagall know? She'll expel Ginny as soon as she wakes up!"

"Now, Ron. I know better than to reveal certain things to the Headmistress." He looked meaningfully at his older son, who held up his hands; he wasn't about to tell his boss anything either. "I'm just--worried about Ginny. I wish she could tell us what happened. But it sounds like she may continue to be unconscious for some time. She may know who did this. She may have gone to London of her own free will, maybe even using this spell."

"Ginny using dark magic?" Charlie said incredulously.

Mr. Weasley sighed. "When I was in school, I remember finding all kinds of interesting spells in books that just seemed to be crying out to be used. And sometimes I did, with my friends. Most of the time, they were harmless. But sometimes...sometimes we were lucky we made it through the day alive." He turned to Charlie. "You and Bill had your share of that." Charlie looked down. Now his father turned to Ron. "You kids think you're immortal because you're young; you find spells in books and try them, not knowing whether they're dark magic or what the long-term ramifications might be. It could be that Ginny and a friend of hers thought they'd have a lark and use this spell to go to London, not knowing it was dark magic, not knowing about the downside, the internal aging. Actually, we're probably lucky that whoever went with her had the presence of mind to return her using that spell; it saved her life."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief; at least Mr. Weasley recognized that a person didn't *have* to be a dark wizard to use this spell. One could just be a young, ignorant witch or wizard...

"If only we could find that Muggle-born witch and the girl who looks like Ginny..."

Ron furrowed his brow. "Could someone have taken them too, using the same spell?"

His father raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't thought of that. It's possible."

Harry went to the door as quietly as he could, opening it and closing it without the Weasleys noticing. He sped down to the dungeons in the

Invisibility Cloak, then stopped in the corridor outside his mother's classroom.

"*Accio parchment! Accio quill!*" he cried. He didn't have time to go all the way to his dorm and back. In minutes, he saw the articles hurtling down the corridor toward him. He stopped them when they were a few feet away, then took off the cloak and put it back in his pocket. He transfigured his jacket back into his Hogwarts robes and slipped into the Potions classroom to write another letter to Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

I hope you and Maggie are all right. If it is at all possible, stay somewhere other than your flat tonight. You can go back to pack for your trip tomorrow. Take someone with you when you go. Maybe Alec? I say this because the Ministry knows about Ginny's accident. It's a long story. They also know you were leaning over her when she disappeared, and I think they want to put a memory charm on you. Do not let this happen, or you may forget you're a witch.

Did you talk to Maggie? I hope so, but if you didn't, it's all right. Please send a reply as soon as you get this so I know you and Maggie are okay.

Harry

He ran up to the owlery and chose a school owl at random. Afterward, he dragged himself down the many stairs to the Great Hall and went to the anteroom to wait for Jamie and Draco; they were supposed to meet him and Ginny after they returned from Hogsmeade. He dozed off, waiting for them, then started when he heard the door opening. Jamie ran in, her face flushed with the cold; she looked like she had had a good day. Draco was looking far too cheerful for Harry's taste. He lifted his face to them, unable to muster anything other than an expression of utter despair.

"Oh!" Jamie said, rushing to him. She sat on the floor next to him, and he put his head in her lap, wishing he could cry, but no tears would come. *Tears are for when someone else wrongs you*, he thought. *This is all my fault.*

His sister smoothed his hair back from his brow while he told her what had happened. Draco sat nearby, watching them. When Harry was done describing everything, he started in on berating himself again, but she shushed him and rubbed his back and he quieted once more. He laid with his head on his sister, feeling her comforting touch, so like his mother's, and he ached for what he had done to Ginny.

* * * * *

A week later, when Harry made one of his many daily visits to see Ginny, he entered the infirmary to see her sitting up in bed chatting to his sister. He ran to her, his heart in his throat, throwing his arms around her. She cried out in pain and he backed up. He apologized quickly, but she pulled his face to hers and quieted him with a quick kiss.

"It's all right, Harry. I'm going to be rather sore for a while. Madam Pomfrey said I was out for a week. Is that true?"

He nodded, speechless, gazing at her face, her dear face... "Yes," he said in a croaky voice. "Have you spoken to anyone besides Madam Pomfrey and Jamie?"

"Just Draco. But I've only been awake for--what is it, Jamie, fifteen minutes? Draco's gone off to find Charlie so he'll know. Then Charlie can go get Ron."

Harry smiled. "You should have sent Jamie to Ron. He thinks she's so pret-ty..." he teased his sister.

"Harry!" she said, laughing, both swatting his arm and blushing.

"So," he said, sobering, sitting down to talk to Ginny, "no one's asked you yet how this all really happened." She shook her head. "And I still have to tell you about Maggie, since you ran in front of that car before I could do it..."

"Oh, Harry! How can I have a sister? Or did you say two sisters? I don't understand why mum and dad never said anything..."

Harry had been thinking about this for a week, and he finally came up with a plausible way for him to know about Annie and Peggy. He told her that he had heard his mother and stepfather talking about the case when he was younger; when his mother had been an Auror, she was one of the people who had been called to Ottery St. Catchpole to look for the Weasley girls. He had forgotten all about it until he had seen Maggie on the train and followed her home. Ginny listened attentively, taking all this in. He also told her that her father suspected that she and a friend had used the *Tempus fugit* spell to go to London; he would volunteer that it was him, and that it was because he had found a Muggle newspaper in the Hogwarts library (probably left there by a half-blood student who had received it from a Muggle parent) and seen a picture of Maggie in it. So he could say that he had told Ginny about the sister and they had traveled to London to find her, but when Ginny saw a cat run into the street she had chased after it and was struck by the car.

Ginny contemplated this story; while it was a good story, especially as it made finding Maggie the reason for the London trip, omitting any mention

of Hermione, they could still both be expelled for leaving Hogwarts without permission.

"But McGonagall thinks Ginny fell down the stairs," Jamie interjected.
"And if you are able to tell your parents where one of your sisters is," she said to Ginny, "I doubt they're going to turn you in to the Headmistress. Or you," she added, talking to Harry now.

"There *is* still the matter of using dark magic to get Ginny back here--"

"Which they're happy about! Don't worry; if they're reasonable people, and they seem to be, they'll understand you wanting to find your sister," she said to Ginny. "They haven't seen their daughter in *seventeen years*. I think they're going to be thinking about other things besides the two of you breaking school rules, or even whether anyone used dark magic."

Harry smiled at her, then gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "My sister, ladies and gentlemen," he said to the audience consisting only of Ginny. "Ever the voice of reason..."

The door to the infirmary banged against the wall and Draco, Charlie and Ron entered, Charlie and Ron at a run. Ron's robes were billowing behind him, his lanky frame moving swiftly to be by Ginny's side. Charlie was grinning ear to ear. Harry stepped out of Ron's way; he didn't seem to see Harry anyway.

"Ginny! You're awake! Charlie said you were." He turned and noticed Jamie, his ears turning a bit pink. "Oh," he said more softly. "Hello."

Jamie smiled charmingly at him. "Hello. Draco and I were visiting with her when she woke up. I wanted to stay with her, so he went to find Charlie. Draco's such a wonderful *boyfriend...*" she added, looking in his direction. Ron's face rather fell; did he care *anything* about Cho Chang? Harry wondered.

"Oh. Boyfriend. Right; Slytherin," he said softly. Charlie moved forward to kiss his sister on the forehead, then sat on the edge of the bed smiling at her. While Ron was still looking at Jamie, Draco surreptitiously gave Harry the map; he'd used it to find Charlie, evidently. Then Ron turned back to his sister. "How are you?" he smiled at her. "I'm so glad you're awake!"

Madam Pomfrey returned from her office, clapping her hands. "What's this, what's this? Too many people! She needs rest--"

Ginny made a noise of protest. "Madam Pomfrey! I've been unconscious for a week!"

"Now, now, I've told Professors Black and McGonagall that you're awake and Professor Black is calling your parents so they can come and see you. I'm sure everyone is interested in knowing what happened..."

Ginny looked nervously at Harry, just moving her eyes. *I don't know if I can do this*, her look seemed to say. He tightened his grip on her hand, willing additional strength into her.

Draco and Jamie left for the Slytherin common room so the space around Ginny's bed wouldn't be too crowded when the Weasleys arrived. Ron and Charlie and Harry continued to talk to Ginny, and Harry felt his heart turn over every time she looked at him; she was clearly so happy that Harry and Ron were getting along, even though Ron didn't know that Harry was her boyfriend. Charlie didn't know either, and although he and Harry were already friends, they would have to take care when telling Charlie, too, so he wouldn't change his mind about that. *He's also my teacher, Harry thought. That's something you really want to tell your teacher...Oh, by the by, I've been snogging your baby sister...*

When Mr. and Mrs. Weasley arrived, Mrs. Weasley came running to her daughter, hugging and kissing her, making her wince as Harry had.

"Ow, mum! Careful!" Ginny cautioned her. "Yes, I'm awake now, but Madam Pomfrey says I'll still need bedrest for at least two more weeks, if not more."

Mrs. Weasley looked at her, shaking her head, crying freely. "What happened, Ginny? How did this--"

"I think," her daughter interrupted her, "that before I tell you that, you should tell Ron about Annie and Peggy."

Charlie's jaw had dropped. He mouthed his lost sisters' names, staring at Ginny in disbelief. Harry saw the guilt he must have felt at thirteen blossom anew on his features.

Her mother backed up, her hand over her mouth. "Annie and Peggy? How on earth--"

Ginny nodded at Harry. "He told me. He overheard his mum talking about the case; she used to be an Auror." Mr. Weasley nodded with understanding; maybe my mum really was on this case, Harry thought. It was a reasonable assumption; so many Aurors were.

"Who are Annie and Peggy?" Ron wanted to know. "What's this got to do with what happened to Ginny?"

Haltingly, Mrs. Weasley told Ron about the lost sisters, and Harry watched his face change from shock to anger. "Why didn't anyone tell me?" he

demanded, his gaze moving from his parents and older brother to Harry and his sister.

"Now, now, Ron," his mother said soothingly, her arm around his shoulders. There didn't seem to be much point..."

"Much *point*?" Ron echoed, his voice going up an octave.

"I'm--I'm sorry, Ron," Charlie said softly. "It's not exactly something I enjoy thinking about..."

"Let's hear what else Ginny has to say," Mr. Weasley said evenly, coming back to the reason why they were in the infirmary.

"Thanks, daddy. Anyway, Harry found a Muggle newspaper in the library some half-blood must have received from home, and there was a picture of me in it! Only it wasn't; it was someone named Maggie Parrish, a famous Seer. Harry remembered his mum talking about the disappearances of Annie and Peggy, and he put two and two together. He told me, and I immediately wanted to leave the castle to go find her; Harry made me stop and wait, but finally, we were able to get away to go look for her in London. We started with this television studio where she was filming something, and we followed her to a flat where she was going to conduct an interview with a cellist, I think. We waited for her to come out, and just when she did, I noticed this kitten walking into the street, about to be hit by a car, so I ran out--I guess the kitten was better at guessing when the cars were coming than I was. The last thing I remember was being hit, then waking up here about an hour ago."

"Who took you to London and back?" Mr. Weasley wanted to know. Harry slowly raised his hand.

"That would be me," he said softly. For a split second, he saw Charlie Weasley glaring angrily at him. But then Mrs. Weasley's arms were thrown around him again, and he was in danger of suffocating.

"Thank you, thank you!" she cried over and over. When she backed up from him, she was absolutely beaming. "You not only saved Ginny's life, you found our Peggy! I can't believe it!"

"Now Molly, calm down," Mrs. Weasley cautioned her. Harry swallowed.

"We'd appreciate it, sir, if you--if you could not tell the Headmistress about this. It was with the best of intentions, you understand. We were trying to find one of your daughters..."

Ginny looked at both of her parents pleadingly. "Please, Mum and Dad. I'm just as much to blame as Harry. I begged him to find some way for us

to get to London to look for her. And you too, Charlie. Please don't tell the Headmistress."

"You could have asked me to go look for her," Charlie said resentfully.

"Well--" Harry waffled, grasping at straws. "I remember my mum saying that you and Bill blamed yourselves. I didn't want to bring up the bad memories if it wasn't really her. You're my friend. I was thinking of this as something I could do *for* you, instead of something I would be *asking* you to do."

Charlie nodded, acknowledging this. Mr. Weasley looked grudging, but finally relented. "Oh, all right. You make a good case." Then he looked at Harry and sighed. "I'd finally gotten to the point where I *didn't* think about them every day. I can't believe you found one of them..."

Harry gave him a small smile. "Glad I could be of some help."

Ron was still flabbergasted. "I have two more sisters," he kept repeating.

"And the Headmistress isn't hearing anything from me about it," Mr. Weasley said firmly.

"Well then!" Mrs. Weasley said, clapping her hands. "We'll have to contact her, welcome her back into the family..."

Harry had heard from Hermione before she left for New York; she had in fact talked to Maggie, and was surprised by how calmly Maggie took the news that she was a witch. Of course, Harry thought, she already knew, in a way. Maggie had volunteered to take on Sebastian while Hermione was gone, so she could communicate with Harry without having to wait to receive an owl from him. They'd been corresponding almost daily.

Maggie's husband Bernard had accompanied Hermione to her flat to pack for her trip. At first, Harry had been saddened that Hermione was going to be away for a month just after finding out she was a witch; now he was glad. Perhaps after a month the Ministry of Magic would forget about her and not bother to try to do the memory charm. It was a very good time for her to be out of the country.

"Maggie's married to a Muggle," Harry said quickly. "We had a chance to tell her she's a witch, but only just; then there was the accident to deal with..."

"Of course, of course. I can be *very* diplomatic. But Potter," Mr. Weasley said, looking concerned, "where did you learn the dark magic you used...?"

Harry squirmed. "I found it in a book of my dad's," he lied. "It was the only thing I could think of that would enable me to get her back here quickly."

He nodded. "I'd have done the same thing. You've a good head on your shoulders."

Suddenly, Madam Pomfrey came bustling into the room. "That's enough! Just her parents now; you three, out!" she said to Ron, Charlie and Harry, shooing them toward the door to the corridor.

When they'd left the infirmary, Ron grabbed Harry by the robes. "Wait," he said, making Harry wonder whether he would feel obliged to tell the Headmistress, considering that he was a prefect; somehow Harry wasn't convinced he felt the same as his father and brother about not reporting Harry.

"Potter; I have to talk to you about a couple of things. First--thanks for what you did. Helping Ginny and finding one of my other sisters. I--I never knew. And--I need a favor."

Harry smiled at him; Ron was asking him for a favor! Surely this was working out well; he would never have done this in the not-too-distant past. "What is it?" he asked.

"Well--Pomfrey isn't going to let Ginny out of the infirmary for a while still. And we have our first Quidditch match coming up soon. I was wondering--would you object terribly to swapping with Gryffindor? We were supposed to play Hufflepuff on December seventh. Since you're the Slytherin captain--could we switch? I know you're not supposed to play Hufflepuff until the middle of February, but obviously without Ginny..."

Harry smiled at him. "That sounds fine. Yeah, we can switch. It wouldn't be any challenge for Hufflepuff to play your team without Ginny on it, anyway," he laughed. "Not that *you* don't make *me* work..."

Ron gave him a half-smile. "You make me work too, Potter." He nodded at the stairs. "I'll go tell the rest of Gryffindor that Ginny's awake. See you back here later?"

Harry was so happy he had to force himself not to leap about shouting. Was this *Ron* talking to him? "Yeah," he said, smiling.

When Ron left, he was still standing with Charlie, who did not look happy. "Harry," he began slowly, "why didn't you tell me?" He'd already asked him this in the infirmary; perhaps he didn't think Harry had given him a completely honest answer, with the others in the room. To Harry's surprise, Charlie looked like he was tearing up. Charlie wasn't a typical teacher, but this was still a bit of a shock to Harry.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," he said softly. "I meant what I said. If you were holding yourself responsible in any way--mum said you and Bill were with them in the park when they disappeared--it just seemed better to wait to tell you."

He nodded grimly. "I can see that. And yes--I've held myself responsible every day of the last seventeen years. Thank you for finding her."

"When your mum and dad say they won't tell McGonagall--they really mean it?"

"If they said it, they mean it. They're not going to take this lightly, you finding one of my missing sisters." He sounded a little envious. How often he must have fantasized about finding them himself.

"That's what I thought. They seemed like that sort." Charlie gave him a small smile and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm going to get all of the teachers together in the staff lounge and tell them she's awake again. And *you* need to warn your team about the change in the schedule," he smiled, before striding away up the stairs. Harry stood and looked at the door to the infirmary for a long minute; it hadn't occurred to him how grateful everyone in the Weasley family would be that he'd found Peggy! Maybe if he and Ginny were honest with Ron and Charlie about their relationship, they'd give them their blessing now....

Harry went skipping and whistling down the stairs to the dungeons and eventually to the Slytherin common room, his heart lighter than it had been since he'd found himself in this life. He announced cheerfully to the Slytherin Quidditch team that they had to practice extra now that they were going to be playing against Hufflepuff in place of Gryffindor, and they left immediately for the pitch, their brooms slung over their shoulders. When Ginny finally emerged from the hospital wing with a clean bill of health, the only fly in the ointment of his life would be eliminated. And when she was recovered, they could tell Ron and Charlie about their relationship and be open and above-board and happy. As he flew above the pitch, the cold autumn wind whipping his hair about, he felt that until then, life could not possibly be more perfect.

* * * * *

The match with Hufflepuff approached with alarming speed. Harry went to his classes, visited with Ginny in the hospital wing, wrote to Maggie and then to Hermione when she returned from New York, and trained his team. The Weasleys, except for Ron and Ginny, made a trip down to London to see Maggie; first Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then one by one, the older brothers. Ron and Ginny would get to go during the Christmas holidays. Maggie wrote back to Harry, thanking him profusely for giving her this family, and he couldn't help grinning ear to ear while he read it. On the day of the match,, he brought the letter to Ginny so she could see

it, and afterward, she leaned forward, wincing only slightly, her hand resting lightly on his cheek as she whispered affectionately, "If there was a way to convince my family that I can be with a Slytherin, I think you've found it." Harry gazed into her eyes; he had to agree. It made the obstacle of his being in Slytherin seem very small indeed. Ron, of all people, had actually been practicing with him for his Quidditch match.

"Now, not to brag, but I'm a damn sight better than any of the Hufflepuff Chasers, so if you can get good at blocking me, you should keep them scoreless," Ron had said to him just the day before.

Harry had laughed. "When have you ever worried about *bragging*? And I've been good at blocking you since we were in third year, Weasley," he countered good-naturedly. Ron laughed.

"I'm not *in* third year any more, Potter." Even though they still called each other by their last names, they had a tentative sort of friendship now. Harry had to admit, Ron was better than ever; he must have been practicing constantly all summer.

"Aren't you worried about making me so good you won't be able to score on me when we play against each other?" Harry had wondered aloud to him.

Ron gave him a sly look. "Oh, you think I'm showing you *everything* I've got, Potter?" Then he shot Harry a grin, which he returned. Draco scowled at the two of them from his broom as he whipped around the pitch, catching the Snitch over and over; Harry suspected that he might be jealous of his new friendship with Ron, especially as Ron didn't bother to disguise his admiration of Jamie. She was sitting in the stands, waving to Draco when he wasn't busy running down the Snitch, and Harry couldn't help notice that there were times when Ron seemed to be showing off for her. Draco also had years of habitual Weasley-hating to undo, and he was very reluctant about this. On top of everything else, Draco was convinced that because Cho Chang was Ron's girlfriend and Head Girl, she was going to try to get all of the other prefects to vote for Ron to be Head Boy. It wasn't that Draco thought he would get it, so much, but for *Weasley* to be Head Boy just rankled.

Harry swallowed, looking at Ginny; how could he have felt that there was so very much wrong with this world? She leaned forward a little more, brushing her lips against his; he opened his mouth slightly and felt her do the same, felt the tip of her tongue reach out and flick at his teeth...

"Ouch!" she suddenly cried against his mouth. She was holding her middle.

"Oh, sorry," Harry apologized; he should have leaned toward her more, he realized. She was still tender. She smiled at him.

"It's okay. I won't be here forever."

She leaned back against her pillows, surveying him. "Ron says you should keep Hufflepuff scoreless in the match. That's high praise from him."

He moved up so that he was sitting on the bed closer to her. "Can we tell Charlie and Ron about us as soon as you're fully recovered? Everyone in the family seems to be over the moon about finding Maggie--I mean Peggy."

"That's okay. We're all used to thinking of her as Maggie now. I can't wait to meet my brother-in-law! It's so strange for one of us to be married. Did she say anything about having children? Maybe I'll be an aunt soon!"

Harry leaned even closer and laughed. "I think they're still newlyweds, so I'm not about to ask. I'll leave that to your mum. Isn't that what mothers are supposed to do to their daughters? Start pressuring them to have children as soon as they've tied the knot?"

Ginny reached up and hooked her hands around the back of his neck. "I think," she said, her eyes smoky, "that I'm not really interested in discussing my mother just now..." She pulled Harry to her, this time keeping her upper body against the pillows, and he followed where she wanted him to go, his mouth pressed against hers, letting it fall open naturally; then there was the incredible feeling that she'd lost all her bones as he held her face up to his, the feather-light caresses of her fingers down his arms and the outside of his legs...

His head was spinning; he had to force himself to stop kissing her. He gave her one last exaggerated smacking kiss on the tip of her nose before standing to go. "I have to get my broom and Quidditch robes now. The match starts in half-an-hour."

She looked at him with eyes full of love. "Good luck."

"If you say it, then it will be so," he proclaimed with a grin and a flourish of his hand. She pretended to be about to throw one of her pillows at him.

"Go on with you," she laughed. "Such a ham!"

He laughed and came back at her one more time for a kiss, which was deeper than he'd intended, leaving him almost breathless. She looked at him from under half-lowered lids.

"Think good thoughts during the game."

"I think after that, I will definitely be thinking very *bad* thoughts," he countered.

He finally managed to leave the hospital wing (after two more false starts) and was glad he'd taken up running again as he had to sprint down to the pitch.

The stands were full as once more, three-quarters of the spectators were booing the Slytherins and cheering their opponents, which today happened to be Hufflepuff. Harry was too happy to care. *We'll show them*, he thought fiercely, walking to the center to shake hands with the Hufflepuff captain. When Madam Hooch blew her whistle and fifteen brooms rose into the air, Harry felt the familiar rush, the feeling of being in his element again. He looked over to where Ron, Charlie and Jamie were sitting together, along with Simon and Stuart and his mother and stepfather. They all grinned at him, clapping, even the twins. He waved back, then went to take up his position near the Slytherin goals as the Quaffle was hurled into the air. Harry gave his dad a small nod and received one in return. This was for his dad as his head-of-house, but it was also for his dad *as* his dad, the man who'd trained him to do this all his life, to follow in his footsteps.

A boy from Ravenclaw was doing the commentary. Harry missed Lee Jordan.

"And Slytherin has the Quaffle! The Slytherin Chasers trade it back and forth, impressive formation flying there, pity they're all such--" Harry whipped his head around; he saw Professor McGonagall giving the boy the evil eye. "--such Slytherins. And Slytherin scores! Ten to zero, Slytherin!" Harry tried not to laugh; the spirit of Lee Jordan was living on.

It seemed that he blinked, and the Quaffle was captured by the Hufflepuff Chasers, who tossed it back and forth on their way toward Harry, all attempts to intercept it by his Chasers failing. Harry hovered near the center, bracing himself. The second the Hufflepuff Chaser released the ball, he was off. In a split second, he had it in his hand and was flinging it almost the length of the field to one of his Chasers, who quickly scored single-handedly, as though the Hufflepuffs didn't even have a Keeper.

"Twenty to nothing, Slytherin!"

And so it continued; the Hufflepuffs couldn't score on Harry, but his Chasers were able to get the Quaffle through the Hufflepuff goals about two out of every three tries. As the score became very unbalanced at one-hundred twenty to nothing, the Hufflepuff Beaters started getting more aggressive. Draco was marking the Hufflepuff Seeker as she'd seen the Snitch twice and Draco hadn't spotted it once. Suddenly, Harry saw one of the Hufflepuff Beaters hit a Bludger right at Draco's head, and Harry yelled to him, "Draco! Dive!"

As soon as Draco heard this, he did, which was probably the only thing saving him from concussion. The Hufflepuff Seeker did a one-eighty and

followed him, thinking he'd seen the Snitch. Then, when Draco didn't see the Snitch anywhere near the ground, he pointed his broom up again and headed for Harry; luckily, their Chasers were busy scoring on the Hufflepuffs again, and he didn't have to protect the Slytherin goals at the moment.

"What the hell, Harry? Why'd you tell me to dive?"

"Bludger," Harry said briefly, watching as the Hufflepuff Chasers started bearing down on him again. Draco nodded and zoomed up above the goals, out of the way, circling around to see if he could spot the Snitch himself, instead of relying on the Hufflepuff Seeker. Harry intercepted another attempted goal and then dodged a Bludger heading for his left leg; it grazed his broom, making him fly crazily for a minute until he stabilized his flight again. He swallowed. He should have seen that.

"One-forty to nothing, Slytherin!"

Now it felt like the majority of the people in the crowd were cheering *them* on; Harry felt the adrenaline pumping through him as the crowd started coming over to the better team. Except for the members of Hufflepuff House, who wanted to be cheering for losers? Harry saw a Hufflepuff Beater pull back his bat and strike a Bludger straight at him, the metal bands on the bat ringing out when they struck the heavy metal ball. Harry clenched his jaw and ducked down below where the Bludger was going to fly; he reached up his hand and caught the heavy ball, almost being carried along with it. The effort of catching it took his breath away and he winced, his hand stinging.

"Oi, you!" he called to the Slytherin Beater nearest him, then when he saw his face, he hurled the ball in his direction with one hand. The Beater readied himself, then swung back his bat. With a crack, the Bludger was flying through the air at one of the Hufflepuff Chasers. It hit the twigs of his broom, making him collide into another Chaser. They both slipped off their brooms briefly, hanging down, one of them by just one hand. It took them a few minutes to right themselves; they gave Harry murderous glares.

Harry looked back at them with a smirk; they *still* hadn't scored on him. He watched his well-trained Chasers put the Quaffle through one of the Hufflepuff goals again.

"One-fifty to nothing, SLYTHERIN!" the Ravenclaw boy screamed. No doubt about it; they were giving the crowd something to watch. Harry intercepted two more attempted Hufflepuff goals, then he saw something small and gold flitting near the ground.

"Draco, dive!" he yelled again. His best friend did as he was told, immediately and without question. The Hufflepuff Seeker seemed to think

this was to get Draco out of the way of a Bludger again and didn't notice that diving had made it possible for Draco to see the Snitch, right near the middle of the field, not two feet off the ground. Harry watched him, grinning; any moment he would have it in his hand...

Harry didn't see it coming until it was too late; while he was watching his best friend come closer and closer to the Snitch, a Bludger was hurtling toward him. He looked up and finally saw it, turning too slowly, taking the blow on his right shoulder, crying out as he lost his grip on his broomstick; he went one way and his Thunderbolt went the other.

"Potter's been hit by a Bludger!"

The ground was coming up to meet him at an alarming speed; he tried to right himself in the air, bending his knees so that he could withstand the impact. He had a split second to brace himself, but he didn't realize how high up he had been when he'd started the free-fall and he hadn't really solved the problem of falling in a very awkward, twisted position.

Everyone around the pitch was on their feet, gasping, and when he hit the ground far too fast, he screamed in agony and collapsed; he was fairly certain that both of his legs were broken. There had been two very loud *cracks!* upon impact. His right shoulder was also in a great deal of pain; it felt dislocated. He lay on his back, biting his lip so hard that it bled, and then he simply blacked out from the pain.

* * * * *

He heard hushed voices. He identified one clearly as Madam Pomfrey. He must be in the hospital wing. He strained to identify the other voices; an anxious-sounding man seemed to be his dad, a terse woman, his mother. There was a curtain pulled around his bed and he could hear footsteps, shoes striking the hard tiled floor in an asynchronous tattoo. He lifted up the sheet covering him and looked down at his body; both legs were wrapped in bandages and there were also splints. Presumably a boneset had been applied under the bandages; in his experience, people with this sort of injury only need a few days to be back on perfectly-functioning legs again. He felt extremely grateful for wizard medicine.

His shoulder ached a little, but not too much; Madam Pomfrey must have popped it back into its socket and given him some pain potion. The hospital smock that had been put on him felt tight around his neck; he tried to pull it away from his Adam's apple, but it still felt constrictive. He inched it up his body, then grimaced as he pulled it over his head. There; no one was around, there was no reason he couldn't just sleep in his drawers. He wasn't going to be going anywhere anyway.

He put his hand on his sternum, missing the basilisk amulet again. *Ginny,* he thought suddenly. Is she still here? He didn't know. The voices and

footsteps receded and he thought he heard a door to the corridor opening and closing, followed by Madam Pomfrey's office door. The lights in the infirmary were extinguished and he now saw nothing but blackness.

He listened in the dark for a particular sound, and after a while he heard it; another person in the room, breathing. *She's still here*, he thought. The moon rose and some light streamed in the room, but Harry could only see it reflecting from the ceiling; the bed curtains effectively shut out most of the light. He continued to listen to Ginny's breathing; it didn't sound the same, somehow. He decided to take a chance.

"Ginny!" he called in a loud whisper. He received no answer. He decided to try again. "Gin--"

"Sshh!" came her reply. "I heard you. Wait a minute."

He heard movement; he wasn't sure which bed he was in, so it was unclear to him whether she was having to travel a great distance or she had to go quite slowly. Finally, he saw a pale hand part the curtains around his bed. She stood in the opening, the moonlight limning her from behind, her thin hospital smock also lit from behind, making Harry's mouth go dry.

"You're--you're out of bed, Ginny. You must be feeling better," he said weakly, unable to take his eyes off her.

"Oh, Harry, you had us all so worried!" she exclaimed stepping toward him. She leaned over his face, her hair tickling him, and captured his lips in a soft kiss. She pulled back, tracing the outline of his face with her finger. He looked at her in awe; the moonlight coming through the opening in the curtains made her skin look silvery and other-worldly. He reached up his left hand and stroked the side of her face, then brought his hand around behind her neck to pull her face down to his again.

She acceded without a protest, and when she made a small animal noise in the back of her throat, he arched his back and responded in kind, unable to prevent the groan of desire that emanated from his own larynx. She was kneeling on the bed now, and she flinched momentarily as he moved his hands down her side to grasp her waist; he needed to be careful about her internal injuries, which still pained her.

He felt her hands on the planes of his chest, moving softly, tortuously, and he groaned against her mouth again. She was driving him mad, and there was literally nothing he could do; he was completely incapacitated, and even if he weren't, she wasn't ready for anything more than some snogging and groping.

She lifted her mouth from his, moving it down his throat to nip at his collar bone. He stroked her hair, her shoulders, her back; he moved his

hands further down, tentatively, feeling a tremor move through her as she paused to take in this sensation, focus on it. Then she was moving again, her lips making a trail down his chest. He was shaking uncontrollably and she stopped.

"Are you cold, Harry?"

He laughed; if she kept moving down his body like that, she'd know exactly how *not* cold he was...

"Not exactly. I'm just not sure how much more I can take, Ginny. You're driving me mad and I can't--well, I can't *do* anything. I can't move my legs, I can't turn over--nothing. I appreciate the thought and all," Harry took a deep breath; it pained him to say what he had to say, "but I think you should go back to your bed."

She sat up. "Are you sure?"

He stared at her; he loved her so much. But this was just not the time. "I'm sure."

She nodded, then reached down and grasped the hem of her smock, pulling it over her head. Harry stared at her body; she was absolutely breathtaking.

"Are you *still* sure?"

Chapter Nine

The Heir

Harry felt like a bit of an idiot; his girlfriend was kneeling on the bed beside him, half-naked (she was still wearing her knickers), and he tried to speak, but the English language had left him.

"I--I--"

"Harry," she breathed, leaning over him once more; she brushed her lips against his, then teased his jawline with her lips, then his earlobe...He stroked her smooth bare shoulders, moved his hands further down her back; she lowered herself onto him to kiss his neck and he gasped at the exquisite sensation of their chests meeting, skin again skin. She breathed warmly on his throat. Then suddenly, without warning, she cried out and collapsed on top of him.

"Ginny!" he cried out, trying to sit up and failing. She looked up at him and he pushed her hair out of her face. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, biting her lip, but a tear streaked down her cheek, betraying her.

"Liar," he said to her softly. "You're in agony. We shouldn't be doing this; we're neither of us in a fit state. I know it's tempting when we'll be spending the night in the same room, but we're both here for a reason. And this isn't it."

Even to his own ears, he sounded annoyingly like an *adult*. Ginny looked up at him. "It was worth a try," she said softly.

He shook his head. "No it wasn't. You still need to rest and get your strength back. And anyway--I didn't realize that you, um, felt ready for more of a, er, physical relationship. I thought you wanted to wait until you were older."

She sat up next to him, kneeling again, making him draw in his breath at the sight of her. "When did I ever say that?" He thought for a minute and realized that *she* hadn't; he'd been thinking of the Ginny in his old life, putting off Draco Malfoy. "Harry," her voice grew softer, "I never told you...I wanted to, in my letters this summer..."

"What?" For some reason they were both whispering now.

"Well--I never really *minded* you following me about. I thought you were rather--"

"What?" he said again, not sure whether he wanted to hear the answer.

--cute." She looked at him shyly. "But I couldn't admit that to Annika and Zoey. I wished that you would ask me out or something concrete; instead you just kept following me around, and then I lost that bet...I was really terrified of kissing you. I had, um, fantasized about you a bit, and it was just a little awkward...And I had to pretend to Annika and Zoey that I didn't *want* to do it, and then I hurt your feelings terribly..."

"You--you fantasized about me? Your *stalker*?"

She lowered her mouth to his again. "You have no idea how much..."

He clutched her to him, all thoughts of sending her away quickly evaporating. He moved his hands around to her front, making her throw back her head and give her lovely throat to his lips. Her breathing grew raspy; his heart felt like it was running away from him, the pounding filling his ears as he moved his hands...

"Aaahh!" she cried out, but not in a good way. She was in pain again, sitting back in a kneeling position once more, hugging her midsection,

sweat breaking out on her face. He silently cursed himself for getting caught up in her again, but it was so difficult *not* to...

"Ginny," he said, reprimanding himself as much as her. "As much, er, fun as I'm having here, you *really* need to go back. You have to take it easy a little longer."

She nodded in agreement this time, an angry and frustrated expression on her face as she swiped away some tears that had escaped from her eyes when she had strained herself again.

"We'll talk to each other," he said in a soothing voice. "Across the infirmary. Jamie and I used to do that when we were little; she'd come into my room when she had nightmares. And when I first started at Hogwarts, Draco and I would talk away a lot of the night. Nott and Zabini sleep like the dead, they don't care. Last year we stopped doing that..." Harry paused, trying to remember why he and his best friend no longer had night-time chats. Oh, right; Draco was often out at night shagging girls...Harry pulled his mind back from this thought before he found it too difficult to banish Ginny to her own bed. "I haven't done that with anyone in a while," he said. "It's nice; just talking about anything and everything, lying in the dark..."

"I--I never did that. Until I came to Hogwarts, I'd never shared a room with anyone. Six brothers; you know. And Annika and Zoey don't do that; when they want to sleep, they go to sleep. Maybe if I'd had a sister...Oh, Harry! Do you think Maggie would come to visit our house? At the holidays? She could stay in my room with me, and we could talk all night and get to know each other."

"That's possible. But remember; she's all grown up, and married. She might want to stay in a room with her husband."

Her face sank again. "Oh. Right." Her voice became very soft. "I guess we'll just have to talk at other times."

She sighed and stood carefully to put her smock on again; Harry saw her wincing as she did this. He forced himself to say nothing as she covered herself up, hoping sincerely that this wouldn't be the last time he would see her like this. When she was dressed once more, she leaned over and gave him a lingering kiss; he sank his fingers into her hair, then used this hold on her to break the kiss and remove her mouth from his. They'd made a decision; they needed to stick to it, for both their sakes.

After she had returned to her bed, he called to her as he had before, and she answered. He asked her whether she remembered their meeting at the World Cup in Spain, and she told him some funny things that had happened on that trip, pranks that the twins had pulled on Percy when he was sleeping...He countered with stories about his own twin brothers,

growing up with Jamie, memories of his mother getting married for the second time, meeting Draco...

He wasn't sure how long they talked, whispers echoing off the hard surfaces in the room, memories and impressions shared and dissected, occasionally laughing softly. When they'd been talking for some time, the moon set and they were lying in impenetrable, inky blackness. At length, the silences between their utterances grew longer and longer, until finally, Harry whispered into the dark infirmary, "Good night, Ginny," and let himself be taken prisoner by the realm of sleep.

* * * *

For two nights he and Ginny talked into the wee hours, and Harry knew he'd miss this when he returned to his dorm. Draco had been staying in the sixth-year Slytherin dorm at night lately (Harry knew that Draco knew he would suspect him of cheating on Jamie if he were to sneak out) but talking to Draco just wasn't the same as talking to Ginny. It looked like she would *still* be in the infirmary when he left. Harry wished, not for the first time, that the wizarding world weren't so dead set against surgery. He knew that Muggle doctors could have operated on Ginny to quell any problems with her internal injuries; Madam Pomfrey had to keep monitoring her and performing spells and giving her potion when necessary. Wizards were much better at dealing with injuries like his, broken bones, or the common cold (which hadn't been a problem for wizards for a thousand years).

On the third night he was in the infirmary, his brother Stuart was brought in by Simon; he could tell them apart by the sweat across Stu's brow and his jaundiced color. His parents came running in after Madam Pomfrey went to her office and used the fireplace to summon them from their respective offices; now they had two children in the hospital wing. Harry thought of the liver transplant Stu needed and wondered whether his mother would ever dare just take him to a Muggle hospital and flout wizarding convention. If she didn't, his brother might die before his seventh year...

He observed Simon sitting by Stuart's bedside, watching him sleep. Simon would be sent back to his dorm for the night soon; he lifted his eyes and met Harry's gaze. Harry put aside the animosity he'd sometimes felt for his brothers. Some things were more important than worrying about tattling and pranks. These were his *brothers*. He gave Simon a feeble consoling smile. His brother blinked as if he had done nothing.

"Harry," he said softly in a croaky voice; oddly, Simon's voice had been changing, but Stuart's had not yet. "Why is it him? Why isn't it me? We're identical."

Harry swung his legs over to the side of his bed; he was wearing pajama bottoms and a dressing gown, having finally convinced Madam Pomfrey that she was never going to get him to wear the hospital smock. He had been practicing walking during the day, and now he made his way shakily over to Stuart's bed. Harry sat in a chair on the side opposite Simon, drew his lips into a line and shook his head. "You're not completely identical, remember. You're a fraction of an inch taller. Mum said you came out all pink and healthy when you were born, and then when it was Stu's turn...Well, he was small and blue and Dad had to really work to get him breathing. And then less than a day after, he was yellow and jaundiced...This has been going on all his life, Si. Do you *want* it to be you?"

His younger brother stared at his twin, and Harry wondered, *How strange is that? Looking down at yourself, lying in bed, ill?* "I would trade places with him in a minute, if I could," he said softly.

Harry studied his face; he wore a very serious expression for a twelve-year-old. "Don't tell him that," Harry advised him. "Even though it's true. It's not possible, so it's pointless to tell him. You know him; that's what he'd say, that it's all very well for you to say it when it can't happen. Just be here for him; during the summer, when he was in hospital, whenever you weren't around, he just looked lost."

"Thanks for letting me sleep in your room this summer, Harry," Simon said softly, and Harry remembered now; whenever Stuart had been in hospital, Simon had come to sleep with him. Most mornings, Harry found him stretched across the bottom of the bed as though he were a family dog that had come to sleep on his master's feet. Simon didn't want to talk when he came into Harry's room, unlike Jamie. Harry had taken to curling in a ball to sleep so he wouldn't accidentally kick him. Even though each twin had his own room, they usually picked one in which to sleep at night. They all had rather large beds; it wasn't a problem to share. Their mother was accustomed to finding Stu in Simon's room or vice versa. Once, when Harry was ten, he had gone to wake them, and when he entered the room, he just stopped, watching them sleep. They were six years old, thin and pale, each curled into the identical position on his right side, not touching, faces so peaceful and careless. He'd had no idea who was who. Since they'd come to Hogwarts, they no longer had to go to any effort to sleep in the same room. Although Simon didn't talk to Harry when he visited him at night, he and Stuart were notorious for talking into the night, bothering their dormmates.

"I have to go back to the dorm soon," Simon said softly.

"If he wakes, I'll tell him you were sitting with him. You can come back in the morning, before breakfast. Madam Pomfrey won't mind."

When Madam Pomfrey emerged from her office and told Simon she was putting the lights out, he nodded to Harry and received a smile from his older brother. She left again, muttering, "It never rains but it pours..."

That's an odd thing to say, Harry thought. There's only three of us.

Once he was lying in bed again, darkness shrouding the infirmary, Harry heard Ginny's voice from across the room.

"That was very sweet of you. As much as you say they get on your nerves, I can tell you really love your brothers."

Harry instinctively gave a shrug, which Ginny, of course, couldn't see.
"They're my brothers."

"And you know I love my brothers, right? No matter what I say..."

He laughed. "Of course Ginny."

"Good. I--"

Harry waited. Had she forgotten what she was going to say? Was she having a twinge of pain? Was she possibly bleeding internally?

"Ginny!" he said in a loud whisper, pulling himself out of his bed and hobbling across the room, staggering from bed to bed. When he reached her, she was staring up into space, her eyes alarmingly vacant. "Ginny!"

She shifted her head and even in the inadequate moonlight he could tell that she was looking right into his eyes. "Ssshh!" she said, her finger over her lips. "I'm listening," she whispered, sounding urgent. "Don't you hear that?"

Harry stood as still as he possibly could, considering that he had to lean heavily on her bedside table to avoid falling over. His ears strained to find the sound that Ginny was listening for; at length, he thought he heard someone *straining*, and Madam Pomfrey's soft, encouraging voice saying, "That's it, that's it, just a little more, I promise, you're almost done..."

Ginny's bed was closest to Madam Pomfrey's office; Harry helped Ginny stand and they made their awkward, pained way to the office door. When they put their ears against it, the sounds were louder, but clearly not emanating from the office itself. Harry tentatively put his hand on the knob, turning it slowly. Crossing to the door labeled *Apothecary*, they found that the sounds were still louder when their ears were pressed to this door, and yet whatever was going on was not happening in that room either.

Harry gently turned the knob to this door, wincing when the hinges creaked, but a split second later, they heard a sound which sufficiently drowned out the creaking hinges such that it ceased to be a concern.

It was a baby's first cry.

They looked at each other in alarm; neither commented. There was nothing to say; it was very clear what had made that sound. Once in the apothecary, they followed the sound to a wooden door on the far side. It was slightly ajar; Madam Pomfrey must have been in such a hurry that she didn't notice it wasn't properly shut. Harry put his eye to the crack, mentally cursing his glasses. Ginny crouched to look through the thin opening.

He could only see a sliver of the room, but he could unmistakably see a bed like the ones in the infirmary, and Madam Pomfrey wrapping a reddish baby in blankets, a tuft of dark hair visible above the folds, then handing the child to a person whose face Harry couldn't see unless opened the door a little wider, which he didn't dare do.

"Have you picked a name?"

"I--I was hoping for a girl. I didn't really give a thought to boys' names. I should have, of course." At first, Harry had thought that this must be someone married to a teacher; no one had suspected that he and Jamie were living in the staff wing when they were small, and no one would know whether a teacher had a wife who was expecting a baby. But when he heard the voice...He not only felt it was someone young, probably a student, but he couldn't help think that the voice was *familiar*, that he knew this girl who had just performed this miracle and produced the squirming baby he had seen Madam Pomfrey swaddling.

"When is he coming?" she asked Madam Pomfrey.

"I called him from my office to tell him he'd soon be a father. I'm sure he'll rush to get here as quickly as he can. Perhaps he'd like the boy to have his name."

There was a pause. "I hope not. Maybe--maybe my father's name. Have you called my father?"

"Yes," she said tenderly. "He's on his way. I thought he'd be here before the baby, but it came fast for a first child."

"Fast? It felt like it took forever...."

"Ah, well, that's because I gave you the potion. If you were a grown woman, I'd tell you to buck up and bear down and the pain be damned; but I can't bear to see a young girl suffer....The problem with the potion is

that even though it cuts off a lot of your pain, it also diminishes your muscle control, which makes pushing harder. And I can't give you anything so strong it will affect the baby. You did fine. Now, you should give him to me so I can clean him up proper. Then he'll be fine in his cot until I'm done with you."

"I thought I was done."

Madam Pomfrey. "I know, I know. New mothers always forget about the placenta. But it's important that we get it out properly, both for your health and because of the necessary ritual that requires its use, if the babe is to be healthy and have a good life. If you were all grown up and going to proper wizarding childbirth training, you'd know all about the ritual. It's supposed to be done with the father. I hope he's up to it..."

Harry didn't hear a response; perhaps she nodded. "When did you say he was coming?"

"Now, don't you worry; he'll be here soon."

Then Madam Pomfrey moved out of sight again, presumably cleaning the baby and putting him in a cot. She returned to the bed where the girl was, and then he heard grunting and straining and Madam Pomfrey apologizing to and encouraging the unseen girl all at once. After what seemed an eternity, Madam Pomfrey was in view again, holding a small white-enameled metal bowl which had blood spattered on the side and a quivering, bloody red mass in it. Harry felt his gorge rising; what the hell was *that*?

He saw Madam Pomfrey smiling. "Perfect! Flawless placenta. Not a rip or tear. A good omen. I'll put a preservation spell on it to keep it well until you can perform the ritual."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" came a whispered voice at Harry's ear. He jumped, and had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out; Stuart was standing by his side, looking waxy and inhuman and unstable. In fact, he started to wobble to one side, and he and Ginny each grabbed one of his arms and hastily led him back through the apothecary and Madam Pomfrey's office to the infirmary, where they put him back in his bed.

"You shouldn't be up, Stu," Harry said sternly, trying to act the role of the big brother.

He snorted. "You think my liver's not going to take a walk to the birthing ward? Walking isn't what's killing me."

Harry swallowed, startled by the casual way Stuart was speaking about his health. Sometimes he *really* reminded Harry of his stepfather. Severus Snape must have been a very strange child. Stuart Snape was as well.

Harry sat on one side of his brother, Ginny on the other.

"Birthing ward?" Ginny said, curious. Stuart snorted again.

"Do you know how much time I've spent in here since I started my first year? *She* was one of the quiet ones. You should have heard some of the stories Pomfrey fed me to cover up the screaming. I guess charms can only do so much; howling because you're doing something kind of like pushing a Bludger through your nostril is probably going to strain any silencing charm."

Harry fought the urge to laugh at Stuart's description of childbirth. He had no idea that his brother was spending so much time in the infirmary, and that he was aware of any student births.

"What do you reckon?" Harry asked him. "How are they covering it up? How many girls do you think have had babies since you started school? Why didn't any of them ask Pomfrey for Prophylaxis Potion?"

"For what?" Ginny and Stuart said in unison.

"Prophylaxis Potion. It's a little like your Porphyry Potion, Stu; it uses spleenwort for the main ingredient. Only when a woman takes that, she can't conceive, even if it's, um, afterward..."

"Oh. Even if she's already shagged someone."

Harry blushed furiously, as did Ginny. "Yeah."

Stuart rolled his eyes in his waxy face. "Come on, Harry. I'm twelve, not two. I know where babies come from." Harry looked at Ginny briefly, then away; when he thought of what had almost happened between them during his first night in the infirmary...

"Anyway," his brother went on, "covering it up is easy. Robes. I reckon there's been a girl in here giving birth about every two months. So maybe it isn't all *that* often..."

"That's still five a year! And those are just the ones *you* know about. Why? Why didn't anyone tell them about the potion?"

"Who told *you*?" his brother asked him.

Harry paused, then told the truth--in a way. "Sirius." It was Sirius in another life, but it was Sirius.

"He means Professor Black," Stuart said, turning to Ginny.

"I know," she told him. Harry was glad to see that Stuart wasn't fazed by having a Gryffindor nearby, the very girl whom Harry used to follow around the castle.

Stuart looked back and forth between Harry and Ginny now. "So; what have you two been up to the last couple of nights in here? Has tonight's performance put you off more shagging?"

"*What?*" Harry cried somewhat loudly, prompting the other two to hush him. When he spoke again, it was in a whisper. "What do you--"

"Oh, come off it Harry. Simon and I know you two are a couple. Draco told us; we caught him and Jamie snogging and we told them we'd tell you. I mean, it never occurred to us you would *know* about something like that and not try to stop it. Then Draco said, 'Harry knows all about us. Why don't you go bother him and Ginny Weasley, they're probably shagging in the infirmary.' Jamie hit him, she did, when he said that. She said, 'You weren't supposed to say anything!'" Stuart's voice went rather squeaky in an effort to portray his sister--very poorly, Harry thought. "Your best friend is terrible at keeping secrets. So, have I put a crimp in your nighttime plans, or do I get a front-row seat?"

They looked at him open-mouthed in disbelief. "We are *not* shagging!" Harry finally said in a hoarse whisper. Ginny looked quite frightened; who else might know they were a couple? It was typical of Draco to assume *that's* what they were doing. (Of course, we almost were, thought Harry. If I didn't have two broken legs and if Ginny weren't recovering from being hit by a car...)

Stuart shrugged. "If you say so..." He didn't sound convinced; Harry knew this was calculated to get under his skin, to get a reaction, and he counted under his breath to resist the urge to respond.

"I'm glad you believe us," he said sarcastically. He looked up at Ginny; she was gazing at him hungrily, making it very hard for him to look away. He remembered in his old life, his eyes locking with Ginny's in the Gryffindor common room, how difficult it had been to break that bond....

He shook himself, then yawned hugely and said, "We should probably all get some sleep. Oh, Simon was here to see you earlier, Stu. I said I'd tell you." His brother nodded, with that forlorn look he wore when he thought about being separated from his twin. "G'night, Stu."

"G'night, Harry. Can you pull the curtain around my bed?"

Harry did this, then turned to Ginny. She looked shaken, having heard the unseen girl giving birth, and now knowing that the twins knew about them. Harry leaned against one of the empty beds, taking her in his arms.

She pillowed her head on his shoulder, her arms loosely draped around his waist.

"I wonder whether she felt a great deal of pain," she said softly after a while. Harry put his cheek on her soft hair.

"It sounds like Madam Pomfrey took care of that," he tried to reassure her. She sighed and snuggled closer to him, as if for safety. He felt a huge responsibility weigh on him, the responsibility of protecting her from what that girl had experienced. He needed to be the strong one; as tempting as it was, as tempting as *she* was, until she asked Madam Pomfrey for the potion, they couldn't take any chances.

And yet, standing with her body pressed so warmly against his...He swallowed and looked down at her. "We--we should get some sleep, Ginny," he said softly. She nodded again and looked up at him, her eyes shining, and he leaned down to give her a chaste good-night kiss. She, however, moved it well beyond chaste very quickly, opening her mouth under his, pulling his head down more firmly. He went along, feeling as though his bones were on fire, and it was only by a great effort that he pulled back from her. When he did, he was quite certain that he saw Stuart's eye at the opening in his bedcurtains. He and Ginny said goodnight and returned to their beds. Harry thought he couldn't possibly sleep after what they'd just discovered, but he soon dropped off, exhausted.

He was woken in the night by a type of voice usually unheard in the infirmary unless a professor came by: an adult male. Two of them. Harry sat up and put his eye to the slit where the curtains around his separated. In the dim light, he could clearly see the two men who went from the infirmary door to Madam Pomfrey's office. His jaw dropped; he knew them. One must be the father of the baby, he thought, and one must be the father of the mother.

It was Roger Davies and Sam Bell.

Sam Bell! That meant that the poor girl they'd heard giving birth was *Katie!* And Roger had impregnated her sometime during the previous spring, when he was a seventh-year and she was a sixth year. *Good going, Roger,* he thought. *Really bright.*

Harry lay back in bed, listening to Roger's and Sam's footsteps as they crossed Madam Pomfrey's office, then the sound of the Apothecary door opening. He tried to stay in bed, he really did...but soon he found himself creeping to the office door, opening it carefully, and then listening at the Apothecary door before entering. The door to the birthing ward was closed firmly this time, but when he put his ear to it, he could hear muffled conversation.

He thought he heard, "Mumble mumble wedding in June mumble mumble..."

Then a louder voice--Sam's, he thought--said, "That's my girl!" proudly, and Harry smiled, picturing him. Many wizard fathers might be upset with Katie, but Harry knew that after ten years in Azkaban, after missing a decade of his daughter's life, Sam wasn't about to be alienating her for any reason. Wait, he thought; *had* Sam spent ten years in Azkaban? Then he remembered that he'd accidentally killed his wife before Harry's parents--well, in this case, just his father--had been killed by Voldemort. Unless he had been released early for some reason, Sam had still served his prison term in this life.

"What are you going to do with your thousand Galleons?" he heard Madam Pomfrey say loudly; it occurred to him that she *always* spoke rather loudly. Until now, he hadn't realized *how* loudly. Maybe she was getting hard-of-hearing, he thought.

A thousand Galleons. What was she talking about?

Mumble mumble...

"No!" came Katie's voice, rising. "That's for Adam!"

"Adam?" Harry thought this might be Roger now. "Who's Adam?"

"That's *his* name," she said clearly, and Harry knew now that she'd thought of what she wanted to call her son.

Perhaps it was an inheritance or something, he thought. Not wanting to be discovered, he crept back to the infirmary and climbed into his bed again.

He had a lot to think about. Then he had a horrible thought; what if Draco was a father? No, he told himself; Draco wouldn't keep that from me. Then he thought, *What if Draco doesn't know?* That was possible, even likely. Harry shivered all over at the thought. He tried to think whether he'd seen all of the girls he knew Draco had been with, and whether they had looked like they had a bulge of some kind under their robes, or whether they had been absent from classes for extended periods of time. No one came to mind, but that was probably because he hadn't known what to look for previously. *Could Draco be single-handedly responsible for all of the girls Stuart has heard in the birthing ward?* Then he thought of Katie. Okay, he thought, so Draco *isn't* single-handedly responsible for all of the pregnant girls at Hogwarts. But I'll bet he's responsible for at least one of them....

In fact, Harry didn't know whether Draco had ever taken any precautions at all when he was with his many conquests. *His best friend*, he thought again. And now--

His sister's boyfriend.

* * * * *

When he and Ginny were both out of the infirmary again, they were still a little shaky. Harry went back to running, but he didn't do as much as he had been accustomed to right away. He worked on his Animagus form too, but for only half the time he had before his Quidditch accident (he was able to completely transform now, even down to the griffin's wings). The one good thing that had come out of the day he'd broken his legs was winning the match and keeping Hufflepuff scoreless. That helped to balance out the defeat he'd caused them to suffer at the hands of Ravenclaw House. He had also been practicing pain-blocking with Draco before the match, but now that he was out of the infirmary, he wasn't in the mood to experience the Passus Curse repeatedly right away.

Harry had been thinking of the big picture concerning Muggle-born witches and wizards while he was lying in the infirmary, and he had a proposal to make to Draco, his sister and Ginny. Since it involved Ron and Charlie, he was especially concerned about Ginny's reaction. It was his fault that Muggle-borns were excluded from the wizarding world; until he could find a way to change everything back completely, the least he could do was to rectify some of the horrible things that had occurred because of his saving his mother's life.

He wished he remembered the names of more Muggle-borns from his other life. When he watched Annika and Zoey visit Ginny in the infirmary on his second day there, he thought of more: Ruth Pelta, who should have been in Ginny's year and whose parents were both rabbis. There were the Creevey brothers, Colin and Denis, who should have been in fifth and fourth years. When Percy had visited Ginny with Bill and the twins he had also thought of Penelope Clearwater, who had never met Percy Weasley in this life (and who, presumably, had not killed herself).

In fact, he realized, Penelope's whole family should be fine, including her little brother Jeremy, who would have been a first year at Hogwarts. So Jeremy Clearwater was another Muggle-born wizard...Oh, wait, he thought; Jeremy would have been conceived after my father died. He probably doesn't exist in this world; but if Penelope had any younger siblings, since two of them had been magical in his other life, there was an excellent chance that any additional Clearwater children would also be magical. Both Creevey brothers were. Of course, his mother and his aunt weren't, so it didn't always work that way...

He wrote to Maggie with these names, asking her whether she could somehow track them down. He thought that it shouldn't be too difficult to find Ruth, if Maggie just called synagogues looking for rabbis named Pelta. It was probably an uncommon name in England, and synagogues weren't as numerous as churches (she could also immediately rule out the ones

that didn't allow women to be rabbis). He didn't know anything helpful about the Creeveys or the Clearwaters, the way he'd known that Justin would probably be at Eton or the fact that Alicia's parents raised horses and that Dean followed the West Ham football team in his other life. Oh well, he thought. We'll see what's possible...

Harry was released from the infirmary the morning after Stuart was brought in by Simon. Ginny was finally released a day later, on the condition that she come back once a day for pain potion, if she needed it, and to be monitored for half-an-hour. Harry asked Draco, Ginny and Jamie to meet him in the anteroom on Saturday morning a week after the Quidditch match. When he arrived, they stared at him listlessly; he was making them miss the fun of skating on the lake, and enchanted snowball fights, and sledding. Fortunately, Ginny's pain potion would allow her to engage in physical activities like this. The first snowfall had occurred two days earlier, and the entire school had spilled out of the castle doors after breakfast on the first Saturday since the ground had become blanketed with white. There had been a fresh snowfall overnight, too, covering up all of the footprints to and from the greenhouses. Harry had been forced to take up running in the Great Hall.

He knew they were impatient, so he tried to go quickly. After he announced his plan, he realized he'd gone *too* quickly, he hadn't adequately prepared them. They stared blankly back at him.

"A General Strike?" Draco said incredulously. "Where do you get terms like that?"

"Well, it's kind of a Muggle thing, but I think it could work! If we have complete cohesion and unanimity!"

"So," Jamie said slowly, "all of the students--"

"And teachers."

--all of the teachers and students agree to avoid classes until the Board of Governors resends--"

"*Rescinds.*"

--the ban on Muggle-born students?"

Harry beamed at them. "The school will shut down. I'd like to see whether we could get the folks in Hogsmeade involved too. A General Strike would shut down the town. All the shops closed."

Draco made a face. "Why would they do that? They have to make a living."

"Because the ban it just isn't right! It's caused a labor shortage, it's allowed dark wizards to take over the government. The people who run around monitoring the Muggle-borns are overtaxed and all kinds of magic probably gets seen by Muggles; I'm betting those memory charms don't get done before everyone has left the scene of an accidental magic incident. Some people have to be falling between the cracks. The Ministry doesn't seem to be aware of *any* accidental magic Maggie's done over the years."

"But," Ginny said hesitantly, "why do you need Ron and Charlie to head up the General Strike? Why not do it yourself?"

Harry frowned. "I'm a Slytherin. I'm the last one the rest of the school would follow. We need Ron to be the public face of our campaign; he's the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, he's the most likely sixth-year prefect to be Head Boy next year--" he tried to ignore Draco's angry scowl "--and you and Ron and the rest of your family have just recently been reunited with your sister who's lived all of her life as a Muggle. Think what it's been like for her! Not knowing why strange things happened around her, not getting to go to Hogwarts. Is it fair what happened to her? Think of every single Muggle-born witch or wizard going through the same thing. Is it any more fair for them? They weren't kidnapped, but still; they're being denied their magical heritage. They're being excluded because of their birth, and those of us living in the wizarding world are also suffering because of it."

"But," Draco choked, "why does the General Strike have to include *no Quidditch*?"

Harry smiled. "Because that's something that's really going to hit them where they live. No Quidditch practice at all; none. Do you know how many parents--especially board members--come back to Hogwarts for Quidditch matches, so they can support their houses? Those are tickets they're buying for the train to Hogsmeade, if they don't Apparate or use Floo powder, and refreshments they're buying on the train or in Hogsmeade..."

"But if the businesses in Hogsmeade all shut down, they wouldn't have anyplace to buy food anyway."

Jamie rolled her eyes. "They could just pack picnic baskets; plenty of people do. Look, Harry this will just hurt the people in Hogsmeade..."

He relented. "Okay, okay. We won't ask the businesses in Hogsmeade to shut down, not right away. But if we take away their Quidditch traffic, they'll see a difference anyway. That's going to be another group of people haranguing the Board to change the policy. *And I* happen to know that a number of Board members are part- or full-owners of Hogsmeade businesses..."

Draco looked exasperated. "What if they just *expel* all of us and fire any teachers who get involved?"

"There's already a labor-shortage. They can't afford to do that. If they start expelling any student who voices dissent, *those* people won't be able to help with the labor shortage when they finish school."

"What if," Jamie said softly, "they send the dementors?"

Harry set his jaw and looked at the three of them. "I can handle dementors," he said stubbornly, but he felt a familiar cold lump in the pit of his stomach when she'd said this. He had a world-class Patronus, he reminded himself. Let them send dementors...

"I still think you're the one who should head it up," Ginny said. Whether this was because she wanted him to get credit if it went well or protect Ron and Charlie if it went badly, he didn't know.

"You know the other reason that Draco and I can't be associated with this," he said softly. She nodded; the initiation was very close now. A fortnight away. Harry tried not to dwell on it, but this was difficult when he was lying in bed at night, seeing in his mind's eye again the Draco Malfoy from his other life receiving the Dark Mark... If he and Draco were going to be spies, they couldn't be public about leading the General Strike.

"So you'll talk to them?" he asked Ginny. She frowned.

"I still think it should come from you. I'll be with you...Charlie's your friend. Talk to him first, convince him. Then when we tell Ron that Charlie's on board..."

"No. We should ask them both at once," he said firmly, having just decided this. His throat felt tight. Please let them agree, *please please please please please*...

He decided they had talked long enough and they could go join the rest of the school outdoors. He tried to be lighthearted, throwing snowballs at Draco and Jamie (but always missing Ginny on purpose). They met up with Ron and Neville and Seamus and had a battle with them, Ginny standing next to Ron behind a snow bank, pelting Harry with snowballs until he fell in a heap on the ground, staging an elaborate death-scene complete with a great deal of very bad acting. Ron was actually laughing at this. Harry sat up and grinned at him; hopefully he would agree to be involved in the General Strike, to be the public leader of the movement. With luck, it would work and the ban would be lifted.

He was going to meet with Charlie and Ron in Charlie's office Sunday after lunch. Ginny and Jamie would come--but not Draco. (Harry needed Ron to temporarily dissociate him from Draco.) If Ron and Charlie agreed, the

General Strike could be organized for the beginning of the new term. During the Christmas holidays, they would send a letter to the Board of Governors demanding that the ban be lifted and threatening the General Strike. If they didn't agree to the demands in the letter, instead of the new term beginning on January second, the entire population of the school would congregate on the lawn of the castle, protesting the policy.

That's what *should* have happened when it was first proposed, Harry thought. Instead, everyone took it meekly and let everything in the wizarding world go to hell...

Thinking about organizing the General Strike helped to take his mind off the impending initiation somewhat (when he was busy, instead of lying in his bed brooding). He wondered how closely it would mirror the initiation he'd see in his other life. He thought of Draco Malfoy putting the *Hara Kiri* curse on Karkaroff before Voldemort killed him....Perhaps in their pain-management practice, they should start trying to put that curse on each other and trying to overcome the pain. He didn't like the idea of putting this curse on his best friend, but if he was forced to do something "evil" for the initiation, he'd rather use this curse than an illegal one.

Harry couldn't eat breakfast or lunch on Sunday. Everything he tried to get down stuck in his throat. This is it, he thought. We're starting the wheels turning. We're going to try to change the wizarding world back to the way it's *supposed* to be.

He and Jamie ran into Ginny and Ron on their way to Charlie's office after lunch. Ron spoke to his sister as they climbed the stairs. "What's up, Gin? D'you know why Charlie said he wanted to see me in his office? He must have me confused with someone who takes his classes....Oh, hello," he added brightly, seeing Jamie. She flashed him a brilliant smile, her green eyes glittering.

"Hello. We're going to Charlie's office too," she told him cheerfully, with no additional explanation. He looked pleased about this, grinning at her, and Harry had to try very hard not to roll his eyes. Ginny saw his expression and she widened her eyes and shook her head at him when Ron wasn't looking at her. Harry shrugged and continued climbing the stairs. Now that Jamie was almost fifteen, clearly Draco wasn't the only boy he had to worry about.

Charlie's office door was open; he'd lit a cheerful fire in the grate and was lounging on the threadbare rug, petting his fluffy black Kneazle, Wronski (named for his favorite Seeker). He greeted the four of them effusively, but didn't get up. Harry wasn't acquainted with any other adult who regularly sat on the floor; this lack of self-consciousness was yet another thing Harry appreciated about Charlie. But would he join the General Strike?

Jamie and Ginny went down on their knees to pet Wronski, cooing and mock-purring to him. Harry and Ron took the comfortable chairs pulled up to the fire, each watching the other's sister with Charlie and the Kneazle. Harry raised his eyes to Ron's face first, glad that Ron didn't seem to have noticed the way he was looking at Ginny. *Now, if only he didn't look at Jamie that way...*

"So!" Charlie said from the floor. "What's up, Harry?" Harry tried to smile at his friend and teacher, looking up at him so disingenuously. You'd think he was the youngest person in the room, Harry thought, instead of the oldest. One of the only times Harry had seen him look his age (older, actually) was when Charlie had learned that Maggie had been found, and he was clearly reliving the despair he'd felt at thirteen, when he was convinced that it was all his fault that the girls had disappeared.

Ron looked at him suspiciously now; it appeared to be dawning on him that Charlie hadn't suggested this gathering. Harry took out his wand and pointed it at the door; it closed and locked itself. "I don't want others to be able to hear this; I'm proposing something rather, er, controversial."

Now both Weasley brothers furrowed their brows. The family resemblance was eerie. Ginny jumped to her feet. "Let me say something first. Jamie told me how she and Harry feel about--about the reason for us all being here. They have a good reason for feeling that way. I suggested he talk to the two of you because--well, I know how *I* feel about finding Maggie. How terrible it is that she was cut off from her family all these years, that she never knew who or what she was..."

"What are you on about?" Ron wanted to know, scowling.

Harry looked at him levelly. "I have a proposal to make to the two of you. I want to organize what amounts to a rebellion. But I'm the last person in the world who can lead it. We need a student leader and a staff leader. All of the students and teachers need to back this or it won't work. I know they won't follow a Slytherin." He nodded at Ron. "But they'll follow you. You're captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. You're a prefect. Chances are, you'll be Head Boy next year. And you," he said, nodding at Charlie, "are the most popular teacher in school. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that if you two say no, this isn't going to happen. You can make it or break it." He was well aware of the power he was giving them, saying this, and he hoped they would take it the right way, as a sign of trust.

Charlie and Ron looked at each other, perplexed. Finally, Charlie looked at Harry and said quietly, "What's this rebellion?"

Harry took a deep breath. "We are going to draft a letter to the Hogwarts Board of Governors demanding that they lift the ban on Muggle-born students."

Ron and Charlie looked at each other again, then at Harry. "That's it?" Ron said, laughing dismissively. "A letter? You want to write a letter to get them to lift the ban? Our dad's on the board, and I don't think he's interested in getting rid of that. And if *he* doesn't want to..."

"I don't expect them to just agree. The letter's more of a formality. That's so they can't say we didn't warn them. I fully expect them to disregard the letter. That's not what we need *you* for."

Ron sat back, looking skeptical. "What, then?"

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "When they don't do what we ask--and they won't--we stage a General Strike."

"A *what*?" both Charlie and Ron said. Harry explained it to them.

"In January?" Ron went on. "Standing out on the castle lawn in *January*?"

Ginny threw up her hands. "What are you objecting to, Ron? The fact that we're witches and wizards, so we can make fires without wood to keep ourselves warm, or the fact that we can set up tents on the lawn that are just like cozy, three-bedroom cottages inside?"

"Well, for one thing, I object to anyone protesting a policy that our dad helped pass..."

Ginny crouched next to his chair and looked up at him. "I don't believe dad did that willingly. He said it was to protect Muggle-borns from Death Eater attacks, but I've heard him say things over the years..."

"What?"

She took a deep breath. "I don't think he did it to protect *them*. I think he did it to protect *us*. His family. He was pressured to go along with it, I'm quite certain." Harry was surprised; she hadn't mentioned this to him.

"Think of all those people, just like Maggie, having no idea they're witches and wizards. Think of how different things would be with them in the wizarding world! There's got to be well over a hundred students who haven't gone to Hogwarts in the time that the ban's been in effect, and that's to say nothing of the Muggle-borns who've been killed by Death Eaters or who have left the wizarding world and gone underground to protect themselves--"

"Aha!" Ron said, pointing at her. "Then you admit that leaving the wizarding world is safer for Muggle-borns."

Ginny sighed. "It is as long as we're not all in solidarity with them. And remember the Squibs...The way they just vanished overnight...Remember

Mum trying to explain why we weren't going to see cousin Edwin any more? The accountant?"

"It was after *that* that dad agreed to the ban, Gin!"

Harry leapt to his feet. "The ban wasn't an answer! It was a capitulation!" He stared at Ron, knowing that antagonizing him wouldn't be useful, but he was unable to help himself. "The wizarding world, the people who weren't with the Death Eaters, they didn't close ranks to protect the Muggle-borns; they turned them out, they said, 'Oh, sorry, you're no longer our concern. We have to watch our own backs.' No. We all have to watch each *other's* backs, before there's no one left. Soon everyone will have to be a Death Eater, or pretend to be one, just to survive. We can't let things get that bad. Every witch and wizard in Britain is educated here. This is where we have to make a difference. This is where the front line is going to be in the battle to reclaim our world from the darkness, from Voldemort."

Ron winced at the name, but didn't say anything; Harry was glad of that. The Ron in his other life would have been screaming, "Say You-Know-Who!" He could see that Ron was thinking furiously; he had that frown he wore when he was deep in thought. Harry sat again and looked to Charlie. "Can you mobilize the teachers for us? Can you convince them to join us on the lawn? The school has to be completely shut down. Oh, and that means we need the caretaker, too."

Charlie looked at him as though he'd never seen him before; Harry fought the urge to squirm under his scrutiny. At last, he gave a small smile and said, "I'll do my best."

Harry turned to Ron again. "Are you with us?" He tried not to look too desperate; he was glad that Charlie had already agreed. Ron looked down at his brother, holding Wronski on his lap, a new resolute set to his features. He moved his eyes back to Harry. "What if they expel us? What if they take all of the prefects' badges away? I won't exactly be in the running for Head Boy then, will I?"

Jamie turned around from petting the Kneazle and gazed up at him; Harry couldn't see her face, but he knew how expressive her eyes were, and that Ron liked looking at her rather a lot.

"Our mother is a Muggle-born," she said softly. "My brothers and I wouldn't exist if she hadn't been allowed to come to Hogwarts. They can't expel everyone; that's why we have to be united."

The faint echo of her quiet voice hung in the air; Ron was still looking down at her, and Harry saw him swallow. It was a very good idea for Jamie to come along, he decided. After what seemed an eternity, he raised his eyes and met Harry's gaze.

"All right. I'll do it."

Harry tried not to grin too broadly. "Brilliant! Now; we have to keep it under wraps until we're right on the verge of the new term. Can't risk any security breaches. Are you going home for Christmas?" Ron and Ginny nodded. "Good. On the way back, on the train, you need to spread the word about the General Strike to everyone but the Slytherins. I'll get Draco to do that; he'll sell it to them as a way to get out of classes, a lark, something to go along with for fun. Some of them agree with us, but others...well, they're most likely to blow the whistle and owl their parents if it isn't put to them properly. The other houses should be all right for the most part, especially the half-bloods, but you never know. Dark wizards *have* come from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Probably Hufflepuff, too, although I don't know of any personally. Best to play it safe and wait until the last possible moment to tell everyone." He paused for breath. "Can you get Cho Chang and Liam Quirke on board before the new term? You'd still be the official student leader, but we can't do this without also having the Head Girl and Boy backing us."

Ron said he could. "Good," Harry answered, clapping his hands together and allowing a real smile now. "Are the three of you doing anything on the twenty-eighth?" Ron, Ginny and Charlie shrugged at each other. "There's a concert in London; a Muggle-born witch is playing the cello. Maggie's helping me track down some more Muggle-borns, and they're getting invitations and tickets to the concert. Could you send on an invitation and tickets to Cho and Liam also?" he asked Ron. "I want us to meet up with the Muggle-borns afterward, explain their, er, unusual talents to them. I believe we have to find as many Muggle-borns as possible and tell them what they are; one of the demands we are going to make to the Board is that they send letters to all of them *immediately* and start letting them catch up on their magical education. The first step is for *them* to be aware of what's going on."

Charlie put the cat down on the rug and sat up. "How did you find Muggle-born witches and wizards? Harry, what you're proposing now is verging on illegal. A protest is one thing, but this--"

"How I found them is a long story; there's no time for that now. As to its legality, I have one word for you, Charlie: *Maggie*." He looked intently at the older man, his friend and teacher, and saw the guilt that appeared on his face at the sound of this one word. He would comply; or at least, he wouldn't turn them in. Realistically, Harry thought, Charlie had the most to lose: his job. Plus, he could be branded as the ringleader, being the only staff person involved.

"When do I talk to the other teachers, Harry? Those of us going elsewhere for the holiday are supposed to arrive in Hogsmeade the day before the new term; the Headmistress will have carriages ready to bring us up from the village."

"Start feeling them out as soon as you get back. Actually, you must already have some idea who will automatically sympathize and who will require more convincing. If all else fails, you can put it to them this way: If the wizarding population goes down by much more, McGonagall will have to start putting all four houses in the classrooms for *each course*, and then you'll all be teaching fewer hours, and pay will be cut. Jobs could be lost, if there are fewer students. Is that what they want? To get the sack? In the rest of the wizarding world the labor shortage has meant higher pay; but it's also meant doing two jobs instead of one--like your dad does--and never seeing your family, or taking holidays. I think the other teachers will see the sense if you put it to them properly, and I have complete confidence that you will, Charlie, else I wouldn't be asking for your help."

"What about the students who don't go home?" Ron asked Harry, sounding like a concerned lieutenant now. Harry had an answer ready.

"We're going home for the holiday, but we live in Hogsmeade, so we'll be back here at the castle well before the train pulls into the station. We can start organizing as soon as we return, while you two," he nodded at Ron and Ginny, "are working the train. We'll stick to students from our own house, and students we know don't have a problem with our being Slytherins, until you arrive."

Harry felt his blood pounding in his veins as though he'd just run around the Quidditch pitch at top speed; the excitement of finally putting his plan to Ron and Charlie was intoxicating. He swallowed, looking at the four of them, for the first time convinced that *this might actually work*.

Ron looked at him with a curious expression. "What do you think your mum will say? And should Charlie ask your parents to support this, or will you do that?"

Harry hadn't thought of who would ask his parents. "I think Charlie should ask them. And Professor Black, too. But don't mention me or Jamie. Don't say that we have anything to do with this."

"Black?" Ron looked quizzical.

Jamie gazed up at him again and spoke quietly. "Our godfather."

Ron's eyebrows flew up in surprise. "Oh," was all he could say to that.

"You know, Harry," Charlie said, looking thoughtful. "I think it's even possible...McGonagall just might back this. And then the other teachers would *have* to agree."

Harry rubbed his chin with his hand; he could already feel stubble growing, and it wasn't that late in the day. "Possibly. As long as none of

them are angling for her job and hoping she'll be sacked." Charlie nodded, conceding this. Harry sat up eagerly, and clapped his hands, smiling.

"So! We're all in then, right?"

He received affirmative answers, the loudest coming from Ron, surprisingly. "Oh, and when you invite Cho and Liam to the London concert," he said to him, "don't mention Muggle-borns. We'll explain to them afterward, when they've met them."

Ron nodded. He seemed to be enjoying himself now. Harry remembered the many scrapes they'd gotten themselves into in his other life, remembered the Ron who had sacrificed himself at the age of twelve after commanding the life-sized chess pieces that blocked the way to the chamber where Flamel's stone was hidden. *This* looked like the Ron he remembered.

Harry knew he was the right man for the job.

* * * * *

As the end of term approached, Harry found himself practically living in the library to catch up on his work. Jamie and Draco were fine, so they didn't come. This made him somewhat uneasy; he wished he knew what they were up to. Ginny and her friends were usually sitting at a nearby table helping her get up to speed after her lengthy hospitalization. They'd brought her lessons while she was in the infirmary, but she wasn't completely caught up yet. He liked being able to look up and see her, sending a secret smile her way and receiving one in return while her friends chattered on, oblivious.

He hadn't told Ginny or Stuart about seeing Roger Davies and Katie Bell's father enter the hospital wing the night Katie gave birth to Adam. (He didn't know how he'd explain recognizing Sam, for one thing). He and Jamie walked to the prefects' meeting with Draco on the Sunday evening after Harry had made his proposal to Ron and Charlie; Harry noticed that Katie was not one of the prefects who attended. He did not want to ask Ginny whether she knew where Katie was; he was afraid that the reason for his asking would be too obvious. He wondered what story Sirius had told the other Gryffindors concerning Katie's absence, but this was something else he didn't dare ask.

A few days before the winter solstice, Harry went up to the West Tower after dinner wearing his Invisibility Cloak. Once he reached the top, he took off the cloak and put it in the pocket of his robes. He swept away the snow from the terrace with a wave of his wand and walked across to the parapet. Harry looked down, contemplating the frozen lake and the frosted grounds, the Quidditch stands and changing rooms, Hagrid's old abandoned hut. The tall pines of the Forbidden Forest waved in the chilly

breeze. The winter landscape was still and serene, the sky clear and crowded with stars. He sincerely hoped that he wasn't going to shatter the peaceful night by falling from the sky and breaking both of his legs again.

Harry took a deep breath of frosty air, trying to calm himself and get ready for what he planned to do. He had been maintaining his griffin form for longer and longer periods of time, but he'd been unable to find a casual way to suggest to Charlie that he acquire a golden griffin for the school, so Harry could bond with it. He tried to remember the bonding from his old life; he felt more and more comfortable as a griffin, and thought it was about time he attempted to fly. He was nervous, but not as nervous as the first time he'd flown with Hermione, when they were worried about being discovered with the unconscious Cho, and even more worried that they would wind up in the same state if they attempted to walk back through the charmed classroom doorway as she had.

It will be fine, he told himself, taking more deep breaths of icy air and exhaling in a pale cloud. *Nothing to worry about...*

Harry closed his eyes and put his mind into the proper state for making the transformation; he felt the change rippling through his bones, then fell forward, the pads of his front paws hitting the cold stone with a light *thud*. He shook his mane, breathing out another small white cloud as he adjusted to his Animagus form. Harry tipped back his head; the stars looked brighter to him when seen through his griffin eyes, but to him, the sky was no longer sapphire blue; it was deep velvety black, and the trees of the forest appeared to be various shades of charcoal grey rather than deep green. He couldn't tell the difference between the castle stones as seen through his human eyes and the castle stones as seen through his griffin eyes; either way, they were a mottled grey.

Harry blinked repeatedly, working up his nerve, then backed up as far as he could; he spread his wings, looking to either side at them, feeling a rush of power down to his core as he began to remember what this felt like. He took a few light, running steps, the pads of his paws barely skimming the stones.

Harry leapt over the parapet.

He let himself drop at first, glad that the West Tower was so high; then he held his wings still, angling them to catch the breeze. After a few seconds, he was able to bank, then he began to actually move his wings, pushing against the cold air, driving toward the forest. He ascended as he approached the stand of trees, and soon he was flying far above them, alternately banking and floating and moving his wings energetically to adjust his height or direction.

He returned to the edge of the forest after flying the length of it and back, coming down behind Hagrid's old cabin in a tight corkscrew, then letting

himself collapse into the deep snow between the small house and the forest, where the wind whistled as though it were a deep crevasse. There seemed to be an ambient glow emanating from the snow itself, but otherwise it was quite dark behind the small wooden structure with its boarded-up windows. The moment he returned to his human form, he was soaking wet from the snow and his bones ached as though they'd been ground to make a giant's bread, but he still couldn't help grinning from the exhilaration of his flight. *He'd forgotten how wonderful that was!*

Harry was oblivious to being soaked, but it was impossible to be oblivious to the back door of the cabin being opened. An irregular rectangle of bright yellow was superimposed on the pristine snow. He looked up to see Davy, the caretaker, standing in the doorway holding a lit wand, and behind him, a cozy fire burning in the large stone fireplace. He looked up at the old man and swallowed. Had he seen him transfigure himself back into his human form? Harry didn't know. He just hoped he'd only get in trouble for being out-of-bounds after hours. If someone knew that he could do the Animagus transformation....

But Davy still hadn't said anything. He was actually smiling down at Harry, who seemed to have forgotten to breathe. Harry felt like he was waiting for something to happen. He finally became dimly aware of both of his feet being soaked by the snow that had seeped into his shoes, not to mention his soggy robes, and underneath that, his sodden shirt and trousers.

"Well," the old man said gently. "I think you'd better come in by the fire, Potter."

Harry stood uncertainly, following the caretaker into the hut and closing the door. It looked far more cozy and homey than when Harry knew it as Hagrid's residence. There was a small single bed instead of the enormous bedstead that Hagrid had used, and on every horizontal surface, it seemed, there was a cheerful lamp, sending reflections of dancing flames onto the cleanly whitewashed ceiling and walls and onto the rug-strewn floor. *Is this where he lives?* Harry wondered. He hadn't thought the place was in use any more.

"Oh, I don't live here," he said, as though Harry had spoken aloud. Harry looked at him nervously; if there's anything more unnerving than someone reading your mind, I don't want to know about it, he thought.

Thankfully, Davy didn't seem to be aware of *this* thought. He gestured to a comfortable wicker rocker near the fire; the chair was heaped with so many pillows and quilts that he could only tell it was wicker because he approached it from behind, where he could still see the basketry. "Sit, sit," Davy said absentmindedly, then after putting out his wandlight, he waved it in the air to produce a floating tea tray, with the scones and clotted cream he'd promised Harry last time. He spoke as he did these things. "I

usually only come down here during the summer. When no one else is in the castle, it's such a cold and lonely place. Much of the summer, I don't even need to close the doors; I just leave them both open and let the breeze run straight through. It's very pleasant; I can just sit in the doorway and read and watch the squid in the lake and not worry about students for a couple of months. I close the doors and lock up good at night for the full moon, of course." Harry nodded; he knew the moon wasn't full yet, that's why he had planned to try a flight tonight; for the next three nights the moon would be full--including the night of his initiation.

Davy plucked the tea tray out of the air with his gnarled fingers and set it down on a low table between the rocker and another chair drawn up by the fire. He poured the tea, occasionally glancing up at Harry. Harry tried to pick up the teacup, but his hands were shaking from the cold so badly that he dropped it and sent it crashing to pieces on the stone hearth.

"I'm--I'm sorry--" he stuttered, his teeth still chattering from the cold. Davy looked sympathetically at him.

"Why don't you go into the loo," he nodded at the cupboard-like structure in the opposite corner, "and take off those wet clothes. There's a dressing gown hanging on a hook in there--wear that. Then we can use a proper drying spell on your clothes with no danger of you being hurt."

"Me? Hurt?"

"Well, we could use the *Dessicatio* charm on you right now, but in addition to sucking all of the moisture out of your clothes, it would do the same to you. Now if you *want* to die of dehydration, that's fine..."

"No, no, I see your point..."

Harry thought about this as he undressed; there was more than one spell to kill people. *Avada Kedavra* was only one. Sam Bell had accidentally killed his wife trying to disarm her. He wondered whether anyone had ever been killed by the *Dessicatio* charm.

He emerged from the loo wearing the dressing gown and carrying his clothes. Davy was standing at one of the front windows. Harry hadn't taken notice of this before; the front windows weren't boarded up. The old man looked quite unflustered as he gazed out at the starry, snowy night.

"Did you see it, Potter?" he asked casually. Harry stopped.

"S-see what?"

Davy surveyed the landscape that was visible from the window again. "A large winged beast. I saw it flying from the castle toward the forest.

That's why I came down here, when I never do in the winter. I was in the corridor on the second floor, near the library. Couldn't make out what it was; I should just go to Diagon Alley, get fitted for some spectacles, but there just never seems to be any time..." Harry swallowed. He willed his heart to keep beating.

"I--I--"

"Well, that's why you're out here, isn't it? Young, curious lad like yourself?"

Harry tried to organize his thoughts. *Think think think think think....*

"The thing is," Davy went on, "I can't reckon how you came to be here. There are no tracks in the snow, at least, not that I can see, and you don't have a broom with you."

Think think think think think....

"Um," Harry began, hoping the rest would come to him before long. "Yeah. I saw it, but I didn't have time to go get my broom. I erased my tracks with a spell so that--so that no one would see them and know that a student had left the castle." He hoped that Davy wouldn't ask him what spell he'd used. *The spell I just made up, that's what spell*, he thought. He hoped there really was such a spell, so Davy wouldn't know he was lying. Davy seemed dangerously *alert*, and Harry was very nervous about being untruthful to him. The old man left the window and Harry went to look at the snow himself, hoping that Davy believed that the pristine white blanket rolling down from the castle looked like it could have been walked on and corrected by Harry.

But then something disturbed him about that uninterrupted stretch of white; after a minute, he knew what it was. "But sir--how did *you* come down here? Without leaving footprints, I mean."

"Don't call me sir," Davy said with an irritated edge to his croaky voice. He gestured toward the fireplace. "I had this one added to the school Floo network. A closed system you know; can't go anywhere else other than Hogwarts fireplaces. Security." Harry nodded; that made sense. And hopefully Davy would let him go back that way. It was also good to know for future reference.

He sat in the rocker again and warmed his hands by the fire while Davy dried his clothes, laid out on the large wooden table that remained from Hagrid's tenure. Slowly, Harry felt that life was returning to his body; between the pain of the Animagus transfiguration and the cold, wet snow, he could have guzzled a cauldron-full of Madam Pomfrey's pain potion.

Harry helped himself to some tea once he was fairly confident that he wouldn't spill it or break another cup. It did the final job of warming his insides, and he helped himself to a scone with clotted cream, too. He didn't know when he'd had anything so good, so comforting. He doubted that nectar and ambrosia were any better.

When he had eaten his fill, he leaned back in the chair; it was tempting to just close his eyes and fall asleep, but he knew that he should dress again. While he was doing this in the loo, he heard Davy say in a loud, clear voice, "Severus Snape's Dark Arts Office."

He's calling my dad! he thought. Damn! He opened the door slightly and put his eye to the crack; his stepfather's head had appeared in the firebox, surrounded by flames that were now bluish-green.

"Albus! What can I do for you? Why are you in the cabin?"

Albus! Harry thought. He's--he's--

"Ssshh!" the old man cautioned him; Harry pulled back and quietly closed the door, in case he turned to look toward the loo and discovered Harry listening. He heard some muffled conversation again after that, and, hoping that this meant the caretaker was facing the fireplace, he carefully opened the door a few inches again.

"He's fine, Severus," Harry heard him say; he must have told his dad that he was here. "A bit wet from the snow. I've helped him get dry, gave him some tea and scones. We'll use the school Floo network to get back to the castle. Shall I write up a proper detention this time?"

"Yes, I think you'd better. Give him to me; I feel like I'm losing touch with him, somehow. He's been so distant lately..."

"I don't blame him. He's bound to be nervous about Saturday. Are you sure you don't want me there?"

"Albus, there wouldn't be any point. You couldn't take him with all of the other Death Eaters there, and there would only be six operatives, counting me, half of them mere children, in my opinion. Six of us can't take on more than sixty wizards and leave you a clear field."

"They are not children, Severus. We're talking about two eighteen-year-olds and a twenty-year-old, all of whom have completed seven years at Hogwarts. Exemplary students, as well. And when you add Harry and Draco, that makes eight of you."

"That's still not enough for us to watch your back so you can face him without interference. We're still far outnumbered by his real supporters.

We need to continue to lie low. I just want to concentrate on keeping Harry safe on Saturday. I could never face Lily if--"

"Now, now, Severus. You'll be fine. I just wondered whether you wanted me to be there to watch *your* back. Does Harry know what to expect?"

"Not really. He asked me some questions; he suspects some of what might happen. Of course, speculation is no substitute for experience..."

"No, no," the old man agreed.

It's Dumbledore! Harry's mind screamed at him. So, he never left the school; he stayed on, taking the place of Filch, one of the Squibs who had mysteriously disappeared. He wondered how the former headmaster was altering his appearance. He didn't notice a cabbage smell in his office, and he didn't carry a pocket flask, so Polyjuice Potion didn't seem to be the answer. Harry put his hand into his pocket and touched the silky folds of the Invisibility Cloak. *Davy would have found that while drying my clothes,* he realized. Any normal caretaker would have seen it for what it was: a sterling opportunity to engage in mischief. Any normal caretaker would have confiscated it. But he *wasn't* any normal caretaker, he'd *given* it to him.... Harry wished he'd paid more attention to the owl he'd used when he sent his letter to Dumbledore; if he'd been alert, he might have noticed that the owl didn't need to stray from the castle grounds at all...And he hadn't given two thoughts to the owl that delivered the cloak. He should have done, he realized now. I probably would have recognized it for another school owl...

He swallowed and closed the door quietly, then started banging about in the small space as though he were still struggling to dress. He opened the door very ostentatiously and announced, "There! All done." The withered face looked back at him from where he stood next to the fireplace.

"Harry!" his stepfather called from the fireplace. "Mr. White has just informed me that he found you out on the grounds, getting soaked in the snow. I'm afraid this means detention."

Harry nodded at him. "Yes sir." He surveyed the man he now knew to be Albus Dumbledore, who was settling himself in the other chair by the fire and pouring himself some tea.

"I'll bring him directly to your office when we return, Professor."

"No need. I'm done grading essays and I'll be turning in for the night. Take him to your office, then make certain he goes directly to his dorm and *nowhere else.*"

"As you wish."

Harry's stepfather looked sternly at him. "Good night, Harry. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

"Yes sir," he said again, just before the head disappeared from the firebox.

Harry sat by the fire again, poured himself more tea. He watched the old man while he drank, then, when the twinkling blue eyes met his, Harry knew he couldn't keep it inside any longer.

Grinning, he said, "You can stop pretending, Professor. I know it's you. It's all right; I won't tell anyone."

The blue eyes were no longer twinkling. He put his teacup down and pulled a large handkerchief out of his pocket, blew his nose noisily. While putting the handkerchief away, he said, "Sometimes," as though he were merely thinking aloud, "we don't mean to say certain things, but we do anyway. Especially if under, say, the *Imperius* curse..."

Their eyes met again. Harry's throat felt tight. "I won't let you down, sir. I want to be as good an operative as my dad. I don't want to serve *him*."

The old man fingered the bridge of his nose gently and sighed. "The only problem with going about with an engorgement charm on my nose is that it's very hard on my sinuses in the winter...."

"Engorgement charm?"

He shrugged, and in his smile, Harry saw a flicker of the eccentric old wizard he remembered. "People pay no attention to details, you know. One only needs to alter a few things about one's appearance to seem to be a different person entirely. A shorter haircut, a larger nose, stooped posture, skin that's a bit more time-worn, no facial hair....And then you say, 'This is Davy White, our new caretaker,' and they all nod and agree, pay no heed, and go back to what they were doing. Your stepfather did that for the first week I was at the school in disguise. We had a good laugh together when I finally told him." The blue eyes twinkled at him again.

"Then--then you never left! You've really been running the school all along."

"Running the school? No; Professor McGonagall is a more than able administrator and I would not dream of interfering in her decisions concerning Hogwarts. She is aware of my identity, by the way. She has only had to ask me one thing since she has become Headmistress; she wanted to know where I kept the supply of new prefects' badges. Otherwise, she has been just fine, and she knows that if there is anything else she needs from me, I am available. I did not stay at Hogwarts to help

Professor McGonagall run the school. I am doing far more dangerous work."

He stared at the flames, his deeply fissured face starting to look like Dumbledore's to Harry, as long as he disregarded the nose. His voice grew softer. "As you no doubt heard from the loo, when you were pretending to dress--" Harry flushed. Why had he thought he could fool this man? "--I have a number of operatives. Some of them, like your stepfather--and soon, you and your friend Draco--are undercover Death Eaters. Others--whom I shall decline to name at this time--are external operatives. They all have real jobs; no one pays them for this. They do it out of loyalty to me and out of a desire to protect the innocent. It is dangerous work and I have never had anyone become an operative at such a tender age. You still have a year-and-a-half of school, Harry. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I haven't much choice, have I? Someone else has decided I'm to be initiated on Saturday. I don't want to be his servant; I want to be yours."

He waved his hand, and now Harry could really see beyond the superficial external changes, could see the man he remembered in the eyes that looked back at him. "I don't want servants, Harry. We serve each other; we do for each other. We want an end of masters and servants."

This, to Harry's ears, was very radical-sounding. He remembered Jamie's reaction to his thanking a house-elf. Could there be a world without masters and servants? He doubted it....

"I don't mean literally," he hastened to add. "There will always be people whose jobs involve what amounts to *serving* others. I mean status, rank, caste. Voldemort and his servants. Servants who obey a master out of abject fear, out of terror. That's not servitude, which is not a negative word in and of itself; it's what humans have *made* of servitude. They've made it base and disreputable. Truthfully, there is no greater privilege than to serve and serve well, to know that you are useful and part of a beautifully functioning whole. I was the servant of Hogwarts when I was headmaster. Fulfilling your role in the greater scheme of things is a very satisfying way to spend one's life. If each person always felt that he had to be in charge, no one would ever be truly happy. Even if one individual was the true Master, he would be always looking over his shoulder, fearing all who are around him, always worried about being supplanted by someone else's ambition."

"Then," Harry said shakily, "I want to fulfill my role as one of your operatives. I want to be useful."

He smiled and put his teacup down. "You will be, Harry, you will be. In good time. I'm sure you shall; after all, none of my other operatives have an Invisibility Cloak."

Harry smiled. "Thanks for finding that for me..."

"Yes, well...We'd better get you back to the castle."

Harry's heart felt lighter than it had in ages as he helped Dumbledore put out the lamps with his wand. After the powder was thrown into the fireplace, they stepped into it, and with a minimum of painful spinning, they found themselves in the Hogwarts caretaker's office. They walked to the entrance to the Slytherin common room from there, and said a brief good night.

As Harry prepared to enter, the old wizard said, "Remember; you have a detention with your stepfather at eight o'clock sharp on Friday night. Now; I must fulfill my role as the person who lurks about telling wandering students to go back to their dormitories..."

* * * * *

On Friday night, Harry confessed to his dad that he knew Davy was Dumbledore. He expected his stepfather to be angry, but instead he pulled him into a hug, then held him at arm's length. "There's no finer person in this world," he told Harry shakily. "He reached out to me and pulled me back from hell. He didn't just save my life; he saved my *soul*. I would be like someone who had been kissed by a dementor if it weren't for him."

Harry nodded, knowing that this wasn't just hyperbole; his dad meant every word. His "detention" consisted of playing chess with his stepfather and talking. They sat by the fireside in his office, a new fall of snow visible through the cold leaded windows, making the cozy room seem even more appealing with its groaning bookshelves and carpeted floor and worn, sagging--and therefore extremely comfortable--armchairs.

Harry told him about the fact that he was seeing Ginny, and his dad cautioned him against it becoming public knowledge. "Don't worry," Harry told him. "We're keeping it quiet for now. I think that when we tell her brothers they'll be all right, though. We've been--"

"No," Severus Snape said to him tersely. "It's not that. You don't want *certain people* to find out that she means anything to you; that she can be used against you..."

Harry shivered for a moment, remembering being tied up in the woods with Harry and Ron, remembering Wormtail crawling all over his body and Hermione's, discovering their physical relationship...

"We'll be careful, I promise."

His dad nodded. "It's bad enough that we both have to worry about your mother and sister and brothers. No need to bring others into this.

Checkmate." His dad's knight delivered a glancing blow to Harry's king, who fell to his knees, clutching his head and whimpering, before surrendering his sword to the knight, who looked quite smug.

Harry stared at the board; he'd been trying for years to beat his stepfather and still hadn't even come close. His dad should play Ron, Harry thought. It would be interesting to see who won...

The next day was the last Hogsmeade trip of the term. The exam results would be given out on Sunday, and then the Hogwarts Express would take students home for Christmas on Monday.

It was the Winter Solstice. Tonight is the longest night of the year, Harry thought as he sat up in bed in the chilly pre-dawn. Tonight I become a Death Eater.

But then he shook himself, annoyed that he was dwelling on what couldn't be changed. He needed to focus on what he *could* control. *I'm going to be a spy. I'm going to work for Dumbledore. I'm going to make a difference.* This thought warmed him during his morning run, and soon he was able to put the coming evening's activities out of his mind. There would be time for that later.

After breakfast, he and Jamie and Draco walked down to the village in a throng of other students, over a hundred pairs of feet crunching through the snow, all of them looking forward to a day in the village shops and the pub, topped off in the middle of the afternoon, for some of them, by a play in the village hall acted by members of the Hogsmeade Amateur Theatrical Society.

The three of them hadn't been planning to go to the play, but then Harry had received an owl at breakfast with three tickets, and a note that said simply, "Happy Christmas, Harry, Jamie and Draco." He smiled when he saw the large loopy signature underneath the short message: "*Charlie.*" He showed the tickets to Jamie and Draco, and then he looked up to the teachers' table and gave Charlie a nod and a smile of thanks. If he couldn't have Hagrid for a friend and teacher in this life, he thought, he was very glad that he had Charlie instead.

The village was a winter wonderland; the buildings all looked sugar-coated from the snow, every shop had at least one Christmas tree sparkling with fairy lights and singing ornaments. Green garlands touched with a frosting of snow were looped everywhere--garden gates, hanging from cottage eaves, winding around lamp posts on the High Street--and a group of younger children from the village school wandered the lanes singing carols, led by one of their teachers. The young voices wavered charmingly, the smallest ones either a third higher or lower than they

should be, producing that unique sound of a children's choir. Harry remembered doing that when he was younger, laughing with Jamie as they listened to the daringly rude "substitute" carol lyrics Draco would sing surreptitiously...He smiled at the small girls and boys, their breaths making little puffs of smoke before their faces, their clothes miniature versions of the adults', with their long hooded cloaks over wizarding robes. A rainbow of knit caps, scarves and mittens enlivened their otherwise dark ensembles and their cheeks glowed with the cold and the joy of the season.

Harry tried not to mind Jamie and Draco walking along swinging hands, smiling at each other. He felt a bit awkward, the third wheel, but he didn't dare walk down the street holding Ginny's hand. He probably wouldn't even see her today...After they'd been to their favorite shops and heard the village children struggle through "The Twelve Days of Christmas" for the third time (each time the "ladies dancing" seemed to belong to a different number), he started to get a little restless.

"Listen, it's early still for lunch. Didn't Mum and Dad say they were going to be at the house this morning, getting it ready for the holidays? Why don't we go help them? Then we could just eat lunch there before going to the play. We need to save money for the London trip next week anyway."

The other two agreed to this and soon Harry was opening his own front door, already decorated with a large wreath of holly and ivy. He felt a familiar warmth deep inside. *I'm home*. He remembered other Christmases, the joy and warmth that filled the place where he had grown up in this life. The Dursleys' house had looked impressively perfect for the holidays, so that Aunt Petunia could show off for her garden club, but Harry had been afraid to do anything but stay in his cupboard under the stairs during the Christmas season, worried about whether he would get a speck of dust on a poinsettia or upset the plastic Christmas tree that stood (it seemed to Harry) nervously in the corner of the living room, as though it were worried that Petunia Dursley might see fit to throw it out this year and get the latest model (it was her great "secret"--which Harry thought was no secret--that she had an artificial tree, and she was always concerned that it look as real as possible).

Christmas had never been anything to look forward to in his old life until he went to Hogwarts. He walked into the entrance hall of his house now, smiling up at his parents, who hadn't noticed them yet. They were on the landing outside his bedroom, looping garlands on the stair railing with the help of some elves. He breathed in the fresh, green smell of spruce and pine, wishing that every day could be Christmas.

It was Jamie who called out to their parents, and they were immediately put to work. They didn't mind. Decorating for Christmas hardly felt like work anyway, and they were able to use their wands for most things. Three trees needed to be trimmed: the grandest one was in the drawing

room, a slightly smaller one in the formal dining room and another in the kitchen. Harry always liked doing the one in the kitchen best; this was the one that had all of the crude hand-made ornaments from when they were small, the crafts projects they carried home from school, their faces shining with pride when presenting to their mother the products of their toil. Harry couldn't help happily humming carols when looping the old paper chains he'd made around the tree, hanging the small origami boxes Jamie had crafted, or even nestling in the branches the stars the twins had constructed from twigs and yarn. During his first year at Hogwarts, Stuart had suggested that they get some proper ornaments for the kitchen tree and discard these remnants from their childhood, but their mother wouldn't hear of it, and Harry was glad that she had refused, so he didn't have to own up to how attached he was to these "remnants."

When noon rolled around, they sat down in the kitchen to eat steaming bowls of stew for lunch. Harry saw that his mother was taking note of the change between Jamie and Draco; she usually didn't get the opportunity to observe them together at short-range. She raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly at her son. Harry smiled and nodded, and when his sister and best friend weren't looking, he mouthed to her, *It's all right.*

His mother looked doubtful, but put her hand over his for a moment, showing that she trusted him to look out for his sister. He was touched; he also hoped he wouldn't let her down.

After lunch they were going to leave for the play; his mother stopped him as he was getting up from the table.

"Harry; can you wait a minute?" She nodded at Jamie and Draco. "He'll catch you up." They looked at each other and shrugged, going to fetch their cloaks from the front hall. Harry sat again, looking at his mother, who now gave what seemed a significant look to her husband, who rose and mumbled something about the tree in the drawing room. Harry watched him go, thinking, *She's still doing it. She thinks she's my only parent...*

"Harry?" He looked back at her. "I'll be staying here at the house tonight, so I won't have the chance to see you off later," she said softly. He watched her fingers fluttering over her lunch dishes, nervously organizing her spoon with her soup bowl, her butter knife with her bread plate, as though this mattered, as though her son weren't going to get the dark mark in less than twelve hours...

"Mum. I'll be careful." He hoped he sounded as grown-up as possible, but his voice caught at the end, and he realized that she probably still thought of him as a baby, or at least, as a little boy who ran to her with scraped knees. He hadn't been that little boy for a long time, but somehow he felt that was how she was seeing him. Maggie Parrish felt he looked awfully

grown-up; his mother would have been shocked by such an assertion. To your mum, he thought, you're always about five-years-old...

"Harry," she whispered, as though she didn't have the strength to speak more loudly. "I just wanted to tell you--I'm sorry. For the way I treated you. And--for getting you into this. If I'd only done what Severus had suggested, if we'd only run far away, to Nova Scotia or New Zealand....If only I'd never made that dreadful promise...."

"Mum," he said softly, standing to leave. "I'll be fine. Really. Dad won't let anything happen to me." She looked at him listlessly, evidently unconvinced. He felt helpless before *her* helplessness. He didn't think he could say anything to help her through this.

"I have to go. The play...Jamie and Draco'll be waiting..."

He kissed her on the cheek and turned toward the door to the hall. He felt rather than heard her running toward him, and he turned. His mother virtually hurled herself at him, throwing her arms around him, and he held her tightly, his face in her hair, hearing her sobs, feeling her back spasming with her cries. He held her for a few minutes, deciding not to ask her not to hold him so tightly (he was having a small problem drawing breath). At length, he separated himself from her and kissed her other cheek.

"I love you, Mum."

"I love you, Harry." She leaned forward and kissed his stubbly cheek, then gave a wistful smile. "Just like your father," she mused softly. "Had to shave twice a day. Black hair, you know..."

He nodded, smiling at her feebly. He turned to leave again, but she didn't stop him this time. Harry dared not look back, so he wouldn't completely crumble to bits. He collected his cloak and was glad to feel the cool air on his face again as he opened the front door. It helped clear his head. Jamie and Draco were waiting for him, standing in the drive before the house.

They joined a steadily-growing crowd of people marching up the High Street toward the hall. Inside, they found that the tickets were for specific locations. When they had found their seats, Harry found himself grinning again. Ron, Charlie and Ginny were already sitting directly adjacent to them. Harry walked into the row first, sitting down next to Ginny. *They would get to see the play together!* he thought. He looked at Charlie, who gave him a friendly nod. Did Charlie know about him and Ginny? he wondered. Whether he did or not, Harry was delighted; this was almost like being on a date with Ginny. Almost. Oh well, he thought. It's better than nothing.

The play was *A Christmas Carol*. Harry sat back happily to watch. He found that witches and wizards had quite a lark pretending to be Muggles, but it seemed to be to show how much better off magical people were. Magical special effects allowed for spectacular scene changes when Scrooge started a tour of his past and then his present accompanied by the ghosts. A level of realism was achieved that he'd never seen before in a retelling of the tale: they had *real ghosts* who had come down from Hogwarts castle playing the parts of the specters. Harry almost yelled when he saw the ghost of Jacob Marley; it was Nearly Headless Nick! Nick had to be careful not to let his head wobble, since Marley wasn't supposed to have died from a botched beheading. The Fat Friar was playing the Ghost of Christmas Present, and a ghost he'd seen occasionally in both his lives, ferreting around in the corners of the library, was playing the Ghost of Christmas Past. He had always assumed she must be a former school librarian. Madam Pince was very protective of her library; *she'll* probably continue to lurk about as a ghost some day, he thought. In another thousand years, the library will be full of the ghosts of former librarians...

What really unnerved him, though, was the Ghost of Christmas Future: it looked exactly like a dementor. He drew in his breath, as did the rest of the audience, the first time it appeared. *Was it really a dementor?* he wondered. But then, under its hood he thought he caught a glimpse of silver blood; *The Baron*, he thought. He was surprised that they had managed to talk the Bloody Baron into participating, but considering that the role allowed him to chill and terrify an entire hall of people, he probably didn't need that much convincing. This was what he did best (and there were no lines to memorize).

Harry watched the play, watched the actor playing Scrooge grow progressively more distressed as he saw what the results of his life-choices had led to...*We never know, do we?* Harry thought. *Even when we mean well...* He turned to look at Ginny's clear profile as she gazed at the figures on the stage, smiling with pleasure or rapt with awe; when Scrooge was confronted with the possibility of his own death, she clutched at Harry's arm, and he put his hand over hers, meeting her eyes when she turned to look at him....

He wished the play could have gone on forever, that he could have sat beside her forever, gazing at her, but all too soon, it was over and they were all walking back to the castle in the dusk.

The longest night of the year had begun.

* * * *

Harry couldn't eat dinner; he was too nervous about the initiation. Afterward, he met Ginny in the anteroom; he was expecting her to hug him to near suffocation, like his mother, but instead, she simply traced his cheek with her finger, looking into his eyes, then raised herself up to kiss

him. She opened her mouth first, and he drank her in, holding her face. The soul-searching kiss seemed to go on a long time; she was the one who pulled back first. She touched his cheek again lightly, looking deeply into his eyes again. Then she left without a word. No words were necessary. He returned to his dorm and laid on top of his blankets fully clothed, but he couldn't seem to fall asleep; so much for trying to avoid yawning at the initiation, he thought. His dad said that he would come to get him and Draco. They were to meet him in the Slytherin common room precisely fifteen minutes before midnight. His stepfather had a Portkey that Mr. Malfoy had sent him; since Harry and Draco had not had time to learn to Apparate (and that skill would be useless in getting them out of the castle anyway) they were going to use a Portkey that would become active at exactly ten minutes before midnight. At that time they had to have a finger on the Portkey or be left behind. And for anyone left behind, there would be hell to pay....

Harry and Draco wore heavy knit pullovers and turtlenecks with thick woolen trousers, topped by wizard's robes and heavy winter cloaks with hoods. Draco wore supple leather gloves with a silk lining to keep his hands warm; Harry had lost his gloves and went without. The three of them looked at each other; Harry thought he saw a twinge of doubt in his dad's eyes. He was probably thinking, *What business have I got taking two children to that monster?* Harry wanted to reassure his stepfather, but he had no words. He felt in his pocket again, to make sure he had his wand. He had thought about taking his Invisibility Cloak, but he didn't like the idea of its being found on his person by Voldemort. He had given it to Jamie for safe-keeping.

He had no sooner thought of Jamie than she appeared in the doorway of the common room. "Wait!" she cried, running toward them.

She threw herself on Harry first, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding his sister for dear life, feeling how fast her heart was beating, how frightened she was for him. She was almost as tall as their mother, he noticed, as she lifted large, shining green eyes to him--eyes precisely like his own--and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then she turned to Draco; Harry thought he'd never seen Draco look more terrified, and he held Jamie Potter to him as though he were a drowning man and she were a life jacket. She kissed him on the cheek too (their dad was present) and then turned to her stepfather.

"Dad," she choked. "Please be careful. Take--take care of them." Then she hugged him too, and Harry's heart turned over, seeing his dad's face when he put his arms around his stepdaughter and held her tightly. Finally, she delivered a kiss to his cheek too and stepped back from the three of them. She swiped a tear escaping down her cheek with an annoyed look and said softly, "Do be careful. All of you."

None of them could speak, so they all nodded, each of them loving her in his own way, glad that she had come to see them off. His dad checked his watch and asked Draco, "I have one minute to go. You?"

Draco checked his watch. "Right."

"Everyone hold on tight," his stepfather said, holding out--a can of tinned deviled ham. Harry wanted to laugh, but instead he put his hand on the can along with his dad and Draco. If he started laughing, he wouldn't stop, he'd just be stuck in hysterical laughter mode all night...."Hysterical" seemed the only way to describe his present state of mind. His heart was thudding in his chest, the rhythm of the blood flowing through his brain actually seemed to be *audible*, something that was filling his ears....He needed to calm down, so he looked at his sister, holding on to the ridiculous tin of meat, waiting, waiting....

When he finally happened, he grunted in surprise; there it was, the tug behind his navel and the nauseating tumbling through space, the awareness of traveling with others, Draco's elbow in his eye, his dad's black cloak enveloping all of them, it seemed....He grunted again upon landing, and Draco did too. His dad was silent; he pulled out his wand as soon as he landed, turning around slowly, checking for dangers. He looked quite formidable like this, swiveling around to take in the entire landscape, his dark eyes hooded above his long hooked nose, his voluminous cloak billowing in the wind. Harry also pulled his wand out, and Draco followed their lead.

The wind whipped their hair about vigorously. The sky was cloudless and they could clearly see the full moon sailing above them in a sky full of starshine. Short grass was trying to compete with frost on the hard ground, which stretched flat and featureless in all directions. Other than his dad and best friend, Harry couldn't see a single soul.

"Are we in the right place?" he whispered to his stepfather.

"Should be. Wait."

Severus Snape lifted his face to the sky and closed his eyes; he sniffed, then opened his eyes and nodded.

"Salt. We're near the sea. Don't you smell it?"

Harry sniffed the wind and he could smell it too; salt and a smell of decay, of old fish, or a rotting whale, perhaps.

"Dover?" he asked his dad, who nodded.

"How did you know?"

Harry shrugged, looking around. "Just a hunch."

They were quiet again, and the wind died down momentarily; now that it wasn't whistling in his ears, Harry could hear the breaking waves on the rocks. They were very close. He saw that his dad was listening too.

"This way," Severus Snape said, moving toward the sound of the ocean.

They followed him, wands out, looking from side to side occasionally, growing progressively more nervous. Eventually, a figure loomed out of the darkness: Lucius Malfoy.

"Good; you're not late." Harry squinted at him in an unfriendly fashion; *he* certainly sounded like he thought he was in charge. "It will be midnight in a few minutes; that's when the Dark Lord is arriving, and then he will summon the others." He was brusque and yet also upbeat; his face could have been flush with the cold, but Harry thought he actually looked *anticipatory*.

His son, however, was paler than Harry had ever seen him, and that was saying something. He hoped Draco wasn't going to spew; that probably wouldn't please a powerful dark wizard. He could imagine how Voldemort might punish someone for being sick with fright. He'd just *love* that.

They followed Mr. Malfoy to a spot near but not too near the edge of a great cliff. Harry felt torn; he was both tempted to go to the edge and peer down, and also terrified of getting any nearer than he already was. He pulled his hood up over his head, turned so his back was to the wind, and put his gloveless hands in his pockets for warmth. The metal frames of his glasses were conducting the cold all too well, and he felt as though he had a spectacle-shaped piece of ice sitting across the bridge of his nose and resting on his ears.

Suddenly, standing not twenty feet away from them, a tall, thin figure appeared. *Voldemort*. If he made any noise, Harry couldn't hear it between the wind and the crashing waves. He didn't exactly smile, but he looked pleased (for him) when he saw that they were already present. He strode over to them, his long legs eating up the distance quickly. He stopped very close to Harry and Draco and looked down at them with his strange eyes narrowed. Harry shook, and he could see Draco shivering, whether from cold or fear he didn't know.

"So," he said in a rich, commanding baritone. "Our new Death Eaters." Harry was confused; he had expected a strange, high voice. But then, he realized, that was the voice of the destroyed Voldemort. And somehow the re-embodiment hadn't quite extended to the voice. It hadn't restored *this* voice to him. He had a very--convincing voice, Harry thought. It was the sort of voice that could get you to do all sorts of things you knew you shouldn't.

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius Malfoy said obsequiously. "My son is very excited that you want to make him your own before he is even of age."

Voldemort looked down at Draco, who had not pulled up his hood, like Harry. The wind blew his fair hair from his pale face and his grey eyes, which reflected the moon, were very wide, gazing up at the most feared dark wizard of the age as if in fascination.

"I would like to hear that from him," Voldemort said smoothly, not looking at Lucius Malfoy. Draco swallowed and blinked.

"Yes, my Lord," he said in a croaky voice. "Very excited." Draco sounded like he might very well have exhausted his vocabulary for the moment. Harry thought Voldemort looked singularly unimpressed. He turned to Harry.

"Harry Potter," he said, and Harry thought it odd that he had never heard anyone say his name in a way that made it sound more beautiful and mysterious. He shook himself mentally; this was clearly one of the ways that Voldemort had managed to garner so many followers, this Svengali-like ability to hypnotize a person by doing nothing more than saying the person's own name so that it sounded like the most lyrical poetry in the world. "I found that a very curious thing happened to me, Harry, on September first of this year. I found myself remembering all manner of things that I never had before. A great many things," he said very slowly, his eyes boring into Harry, while Harry wished he would speak again so he could continue to hear that smooth voice.... "Did you remember anything--*unusual* that day, Harry?"

Harry shook himself mentally again. *Concentrate, concentrate*, he commanded himself. *Don't get sucked in....* "I don't know what you mean, my Lord. I--I did not recall anything unusual." He tried to sound as confident as the man before him, who even towered a few inches over his extraordinarily tall stepfather. Harry longed to look to his stepfather for reassurance, but he was finding it difficult to tear his eyes away from the eyes of the dark wizard; somehow, it seemed that the most peaceful and wonderful thing in the world would be to gaze into those eyes forever....

"Nothing?" the voice wondered, bringing Harry back. He forced himself to lower his eyes to the tall wizard's silver cloak fastenings, which were, after all, at his eye-level.

"No, my Lord. I--I occasionally have had dreams. Very strange, very *real* dreams; but that is all."

"Ah," he said, and even this was beautiful and mellifluous. "Dreams. Yes; I can see how--yes. Never mind, Harry. It is unimportant."

Harry dared to look up at those eyes again; had he believed him? Did he really think that Harry didn't remember the other life? He hoped so. It seemed like the safest thing, especially if he was going to be a convincing spy.

He turned to Lucius Malfoy. "Malfoy. Hold out your arm. It is time to summon the others."

Mr. Malfoy quaked, looking at that pale face. "Me, my Lord? I--I--"

The dark wizard made a disgusted look, then turned it into the strangest laugh that Harry had ever heard. "Oh, calm down. I'll use Snape; he can take it."

Harry turned to his dad; what was Voldemort talking about? His stepfather's jaw was tightly clenched. He wasn't going to argue with this plan, but he didn't look happy about it either. Whatever he was going to "use" his dad for, it couldn't be good...

Severus Snape pushed up the sleeve of his cloak, then his robes, then the clothes he wore under that, finally revealing the pale skin of his left forearm and the vivid mark there on his sinewy, muscular arm, strong from years of tightly grasping a broomstick while playing Quidditch. A skull with a serpent. *The Dark Mark*. Harry swallowed. He would have one of those before the night was over. It hurt, he knew. He wondered what--

"Aaah!" his stepfather gasped softly, clamping his mouth tightly shut, keeping the rest of his pain inside. Voldemort had placed the tip of his wand against the crook of his dad's elbow, and the mark had darkened; Harry thought he smelled burning flesh. He felt a chill move down his spine as he watched his stepfather's silent agony. *Please end it, please end it*, he thought desperately, wondering how long Voldemort would keep this up.

It was probably only a minute, but it felt like an eternity to Harry. Watching this man who had raised him suffer like this.... he felt so helpless. What if he had to hurt someone, to prove himself? He remembered what both of his parents had said about the impending initiation. He remembered Hermione arguing with him in his other life about why he couldn't become a Death Eater to protect them...

"But Harry, if you were--hypothetically--to become a Death Eater, what if you were told to torture people? If you didn't do it, you'd be tortured instead..."

"I don't care about that. That's just my own pain; I've coped with it before. I can do it again."

"But you see, Harry," she said pleadingly, tears starting to form in her eyes, "that's why you can't be a Death Eater. Because you'd rather suffer yourself than see anyone else suffer. You're just not cut out for it."

He swallowed. She had been right, but there wasn't much point to knowing that now. He was stuck. For now he had to go along, and hope for the best.

At first, the Death Eaters who had been summoned appeared around them one by one, but after another minute, they were coming thick and fast, until finally, a ring of at least sixty wizards (and a few witches) was formed around where they were standing. Harry swallowed; Dumbledore had said that with Harry and Draco, the number of spies would be eight. He and Draco were only sixteen, and three of the others were twenty or younger. And they would be outnumbered about seven to one. Those are not good odds, he thought. Voldemort was here, as well. This would not be a good time to start a fight. It was time to blend in and be just another Death Eater.

As Harry stared frantically at the wand touching his dad's arm, he thought about his own wand. *Is it the same as in my old life?* he wondered, wrapping his fingers around it in his pocket. He thought as hard as he could, trying to distract himself, dredging up a memory from over five years earlier, from the same day he'd gone shopping with his mother for his school supplies for his first year...

Harry stumbled out of Flourish & Blotts, pulled by Jamie. He had wanted to talk to the pretty girl with red hair for a few moments longer, but his sister was right; he needed a wand. His first wand! He began to slow down when they reached the narrow, shabby shop, shoehorned in between one with piles of different size cauldrons out front, and a divination supply shop. Harry became dizzy, seeing himself reflected repeatedly in the array of crystal balls on display in the window.

The gold letters over the wand shop door were peeling. Harry looked longingly at the wand in the window, lying on a dusty purple cushion that had faded from years of exposure to sunlight. Ollivanders. He was finally getting a wand from Ollivanders...

A bell tinkled when they opened the door. Inside, the tiny space was a shambles. Jamie claimed the single, spindly chair with relief; no sitting on the floor this time. He saw her look distastefully at the dust around the legs of the chair. This place could really do with a cleaning charm, he could imagine her thinking. For the first time, Harry was doubtful; how good

were these wands if the shop owner couldn't use one of them to remove some dust?

The bell tinkled again as the door opened; it was Draco and his father. "Ah," Mr. Malfoy said to Harry's mother. "Lily. A pleasure, as always," he said silkily. His voice made Harry want to cringe. Mr. Malfoy looked around the messy shop distastefully. The hair stood up on the back of Harry's neck; he looked at his best friend and could tell that he felt strange too. There was something eerie about this place; the magic here was almost tangible.

"Lucius," his mother said with a nod; he wasn't going to get more of an acknowledgment from her than that. Draco's father frowned and looked as though he might say something snide, but suddenly they were all distracted by a very soft voice.

"Good afternoon." Draco jumped, and Harry spun around. Mr. Ollivander's wide, pale eyes moved closer and closer, and Harry fought the urge to run from the shop and never return. He heard Jamie make a noise like "eep."

"Yes, yes," the owner of the wand shop said. "So, it's that time already. Both Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter are going off to Hogwarts. Oh, hello my dear," he said to Harry's mother. "Your willow wand still suiting you?"

She nodded and gave him a small smile. "Quite well, thank you."

"And Mr. Malfoy..." the soft voice sounded ominous now, and Mr. Ollivander's eyes seemed to bore into Lucius Malfoy's. Mr. Malfoy stared obstinately back at him, his jaw clenched tightly as though he were biting back a cutting remark.

"Ollivander..." Mr. Malfoy said with a curt nod.

Finally, he turned back to Harry and Draco. "Present wand arms, please." They each held out an arm; Harry his right, Draco his left. He started measuring each of them himself, all over the place, arms and legs and heads. When he began dashing back and forth, fetching wands for them to try (a great number were still on tables and counters from a previous customer) the tape measure kept up the measuring by itself. Harry could tell that Draco didn't care for this. Finally, Ollivander said to it, "That will do." It dropped to the dusty floor.

"Right. For Mr. Potter, sugar maple with unicorn hair; for Mr. Malfoy, ebony with phoenix feather." Each of them had barely touched the wands when he shouted, "Switch!" Harry handed the one he'd been trying to Draco, and Draco handed the one he'd tried to Harry. A split second later each of them had these wands ripped out of their hands by Mr. Ollivander, who had thrust two more wands at them, describing the wood and the cores. Every time he cried, "Switch!" they traded wands, and then he would pluck them from their hands and put different ones between their fingers. Harry understood now why the shop was such a mess.

Ollivander ploughed through the pile of boxes around him, and Harry was unsure how he could tell he wasn't giving them the same wands twice; it was the most disorganized thing he'd ever seen. Finally, after Mr. Ollivander said, "Switch!" for what seemed the hundredth time, Draco took the wand from Harry that he'd been using, and the moment he touched it, Harry could see that a tremor moved through Draco, and his best friend looked profoundly moved. He brought the wand down, swishing it through the dusty air of the shop, and a stream of silver and green sparks cascaded from the end.

"Oooh!" Jamie breathed. "That's it, Draco!"

Draco looked down at his hand in wonder, then up at Mr. Ollivander for confirmation. "The young lady is correct. Linden and dragon heartstring. Ten-and-a-half inches. Very good. That will be seven Galleons, sir," he said, directing this to Mr. Malfoy, who threw the money down on a dusty table with a look of disgust on his face.

"Come, Draco."

"But Dad--can't I stay and see Harry get his? Please?"

Lucius Malfoy looked down at his son as though he hated him; he saw the way the four of them looked at him and tried to rearrange his features to appear more pleasant, but Harry could tell it was a strain.

"Very well," he said reluctantly.

Harry continued to try wands. Nothing seemed to suit him. Finally, Mr. Ollivander stood holding a wand, as though he were about to hand it to Harry, but he hesitated. "Now this wand," he said, pausing. "This wand--it's not that it's not a very nice wand. Eleven inches, good and supple, holly and

phoenix feather. It's just that--" and then he paused. And paused. You could hear a pin drop.

"What?" Harry finally asked, breaking the silence. If he didn't know better, he could have sworn that all of them were holding their breaths.

"It may be nothing. Why don't you try it?" He put it in Harry's hand, and immediately, Harry felt a warmth in his fingers. He swished the wand through the air as Draco had done, and gold and red sparks spilled from the end. Jamie clapped in delight, and his mother looked visibly relieved that the search was finally over, wearily reaching into her bag to retrieve seven gold Galleons to give to Mr. Ollivander.

Mr. Ollivander, however, was ignoring Harry's mother, muttering to himself, "Curious...curious..."

Harry furrowed his brow. He was about to speak, but suddenly, Mr. Malfoy's impatient voice sounded. "Out with it man!" His voice echoed in the small shop. "What's so damned curious?"

Mr. Ollivander gazed back at Mr. Malfoy, looking quite ominous again, and Harry shivered. "You'll be interested in this, Mr. Malfoy. This wand and the wand that killed the father of these children," he nodded at Harry and Jamie, "are brothers. They each have a tail feather from the same phoenix. That wand was thirteen-and-a-half inches. Made of yew. But the same core. Since they are brothers, these two wands cannot be used against each other; they will not work correctly. But in tandem..." Mr. Ollivander looked closely at Harry, "in tandem, brother wands can do great things...."

Harry swallowed; he had a wand that was brother to the wand used by his father's murderer! He wanted to drop it and flee, but suddenly, the wand was torn from his hand by Mr. Malfoy, who was thrusting it upon his son. "This is the wand for Draco! I want my son to have this wand! Why didn't you let him try it?"

Draco's father grasped his arm and made him wave the wand through the air; Harry's best friend appeared to be a very large puppet. But no sparks appeared from the wand when he used it. Mr. Malfoy jerked Draco's arm around some more, trying to get the wand to respond. Harry was starting to fear that he was going to rip his son's arm off.

Mr. Ollivander deftly removed the wand from Draco's grasp. "The wand has chosen its owner, Mr. Malfoy. You know that a wizard will never get the best results from another wizard's wand."

Harry looked at his mother, who wore a terrified expression on her face. "Are--are you sure?" she said softly. "There isn't another that might be--more suitable?"

Harry would have laughed if it weren't such a dire situation; Mr. Malfoy wanted Draco to have the wand that was brother to Voldemort's, and his mother would have preferred him to have any other. He wasn't sure how he felt about the wand's brother, but he knew that this wand made him feel strong and powerful when he'd held it.

"I want it, Mum," he said softly. "I want that wand."

His mother gave him a dreadful look. He swallowed and looked down. Mr. Ollivander wrapped his wand and gave it to him, and his mother paid. They left the shop, all rather subdued. Outside, Mr. Malfoy stopped Harry's mother.

"Lily, let's be reasonable. You don't want Harry to have that wand, of all wands, and I do want Draco to have it. Why can't they just trade?"

Harry could see that she looked nervous, but her voice was as confident as ever. He had a feeling that if there was something Lucius Malfoy wanted, she was determined to make certain that he didn't get it.

"I'm sorry, Lucius. Harry is keeping the wand. Come along, you two. Good day, Lucius." She afforded Draco a sympathetic smile. "We'll see you on the first, Draco."

Harry and Jamie called goodbye to Draco as they followed their mother down the winding walkway; Mr. Malfoy was holding his son's biceps. Harry looked up at his mother again. "Thanks, mum. For the wand," he said with a smile, but his mother had that terrible expression on her face again.

She looked as though he had killed her.

Was that when it had started? Harry wondered. Was that when he became convinced that his mother hated him? When it seemed she thought he'd become evil? He had no time to contemplate this; Voldemort lifted his wand and finally stopped his stepfather's pain. Harry ached inside, seeing the sweat and anguish on his face. He had only uttered that one soft cry

of shock when the pain began, and was thereafter silent. Either he has also learned pain-blocking, Harry thought, or he has a great deal of control.

The Dark Lord waved Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy to the perimeter of the large circle that had formed, leaving Harry and Draco to shiver beside him, awaiting their fate. Draco *really* looked like he was going to spew, Harry thought. When the assembled figures finally quieted, their master turned about, surveying them, nodding with satisfaction as he was presented with the evidence of his power and influence. *He feels like he owns them*, Harry thought. *Property*.

The circle of Death Eaters was very large compared to the one he remembered from his dream, when he'd seen Draco Malfoy initiated. In this life, there had been no dropping away of followers, but a steady growth in the ranks. Harry tried to calm his empty stomach, but it was jumping about in a most distracting way. Maybe *I'm* the one who's going to spew, he thought. He noticed that Voldemort did not have a snake or a wizard who appeared to be his lieutenant, as Wormtail had been. He imagined that Lucius Malfoy would like to be that lieutenant, but Voldemort's treatment of Malfoy made that seem an unlikely development.

Finally, he turned and said to those assembled, in that amazing voice, "My children..."

A chorus of voices answered, "My Lord..."

"Tonight we will add two more to our number. And not just any two; we have here "The Lion," he waved a casual hand in Harry's direction, "and the Moonchild," he said, indicating Draco. "These boys were to have been my enemies, my Achilles' heel. Instead of eliminating them, I showed mercy, I spared their lives, and they were raised to be my servants. Now they are here to acknowledge me as their true master, to join us in our circle...."

Harry tried to swallow, but his throat wouldn't cooperate. He glanced at Draco, who was shaking. Suddenly, his knees were bending and he found himself on the ground, gasping; he looked up at the towering figure before him. Draco, beside him, was also kneeling.

Voldemort walked around them, surveying them. Harry fought the urge to follow him with his eyes. "Fine specimens, aren't they?" he asked no one in particular as he walked. He was out of Harry's range of vision when he suddenly heard the cry of, "*Crucio!*"

He felt no pain; he turned his head and knew why. Draco had thrown back his head in agony; his entire body convulsed. His jaw was showing the strain of being clamped shut; only soft guttural grunts escaped him, but

there was sweat running down his pale face, mingling with tears that had escaped from his tightly-closed eyes. Harry fought the urge to pull out his wand and put a stop to it, but then he remembered that he couldn't use his wand against this man...Did he *know* that? he wondered. Had Lucius Malfoy told him? Perhaps that was why--

Gasp! Draco let out a sound that turned Harry's stomach as the spell was terminated. Although he had been kneeling upright during the torture, he was lying on the ground now, in the fetal position. The tall figure waited as, breathing heavily, Draco struggled to a standing position again. He was promptly pushed onto his knees once more by the same invisible hand. Harry watched his best friend, wishing he could help him in some way, but--

"*Crucio!*"

The pain hit all of his body at once, like thousands of razor-sharp knives entering his skin simultaneously. He concentrated as hard as he could; then suddenly, there was no pain; there was only floating, floating above the cold grey landscape, watching with fascination the crackling amber light that connected his body with Voldemort's wand. He saw Draco's surprise; he saw his father's surprise too, and Lucius Malfoy's. Finally, he saw Voldemort's eyes widening as the torture continued, and he watched his body serenely kneeling, arms outstretched as if in ecstatic prayer, his face peaceful and serene.

At last, he saw Voldemort break the connection between his wand and the body he had almost stopped thinking of as his own. He let himself slip back down into that body, opened his eyes slowly, blinking. He saw the Dark Lord gazing back at him with narrowed eyes.

"You did not cry out," he said to Draco. "And you," he added in an even softer voice, turning to Harry, "did not appear to feel any pain *at all*."

Harry swallowed. "My Lord," he said, hoping he would be convinced. "I--have never felt such pain before. We--we knew it would be disrespectful to cry out. To complain about receiving what we deserve." He looked at Draco with just his eyes, not turning his head, then quickly looked back to Voldemort, wondering whether he would believe this. Voldemort was still surveying Harry with a great deal of interest, and Harry held his breath, waiting.

Finally, an eerie smile curled around the corners of his mouth. "So. You *did* feel the pain. It hurt, didn't it?"

"Yes, my Lord," they said in unison.

Harry shivered as he anticipated the next words: "*Ask me not to do it again.*"

"Please don't do it again, my Lord," they both said. Harry fought the urge to look round at all of the assembled Death Eaters, to see who else had already undergone this ritual of subservience. He bade both of them to rise.

"Give me your arm," he said to Draco, who extended it, shaking. Harry bit his lip; he knew that this would be both very different and far worse than the Cruciatus Curse. Voldemort pulled back Draco's sleeve and put his wand to the pale skin. "Whose are you?"

"Yours, my Lord."

"*MORSMORDRE!*"

Draco's agonized scream hung in the cold air and he fell to his knees. The skull and snake figure were emerging from his flesh as though they'd been hiding under the surface and were being slowly revealed, pushed up to be seen by the world at large. Harry smelled the burning flesh, just like in his vision, when he had seen the heir get his mark. At last, it was done, and Draco slowly raised his head again, panting, cradling the faintly-smoking arm. Harry had told him what to say afterward, but he didn't do it, too bound up in his pain.

It's my turn now, he thought.

He swallowed as Voldemort turned to him. He pulled up his own sleeve and presented his arm, looking in those strange eyes and trying to maintain his sense of self, making certain he did not become immersed in those eyes, did not lose himself...

"Whose are you?"

"Yours, my Lord."

"*MORSMORDRE!*"

"Aaah!" he cried out once before clamping his mouth shut. He managed to do it again; he rolled his eyes back in his head and floated up, watching dispassionately as the mark painted itself on his arm, as the skull and snake appeared in inky black, a permanent mark of ownership.

Finally, it was over, and Harry sank gratefully back down into his body, fighting the urge to touch his smoking arm, looking up at Voldemort and saying what he'd told Draco to say.

"Thank you, my Lord."

As he had in that other life, the tall wizard threw back his head and laughed. He turned to the other wizards in the circle, and now they knew

that they, too, had permission to laugh appreciatively, and the sound of dozens of different voices laughing at this struck a discordant note on the cold, winter air. When the laughter finally died down, Voldemort turned around in a circle, speaking as he turned, so all would hear him.

"Two more are added to our number! But that is not the only reason I summoned you all here tonight..."

Here it comes, Harry thought. We're about to find out what horrible thing we have to do, whom we must torture or kill. His stomach was leaping about again as he anticipated what this might be, who might have made a misstep and displeased their capricious master...

"Tonight--" he paused for effect, and Harry found himself grudgingly admiring that rich, persuasive voice again. "Tonight, I officially recognize before you all--my Heir."

A gasp went up from those assembled, and Harry was surprised to find that he too had gasped. *The Heir!* At last, he would learn the identity of *the Heir!*

Then another gasp died in his throat as one thought occupied his brain:

Why did Voldemort seem to be looking right at *him*?

Chapter Ten

A Perfect Spy

Harry held his breath. He remembered seeing Voldemort place his wand against his forehead when he was a baby, after his mother had promised to raise him to be Voldemort's servant. Had he been making him his heir when he did that? He shifted his eyes slightly; Draco was looking at him in awe, and Harry hated the fear that he saw in his best friend's face. *No!* he thought desperately. *I can't be! No no no no no...*

"Young Potter and Malfoy...Normally, I would have you--do something for me at this time. But not tonight. You will know soon enough what I require of you." he said, pointing to where Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy stood. "There is more--important work to be done this night." His voice had become very soft and dangerous-sounding.

Harry tried to hide his relief as he moved with Draco back toward his dad and Mr. Malfoy, Harry turned his head slightly and saw a figure that was very nearly as tall as Voldemort; he was wearing a long cloak with the hood pulled up so that the moon cast his face into shadow. Harry's relief at not being the heir now evolved into a deep, cold fear of whatever evil deeds Voldemort might assign to his heir. *Why did someone trying to become immortal need an heir?* he wondered.

The tall figure stepped forward; he was rather stoop-shouldered, so perhaps if he stood up straight he would be as tall as Voldemort after all, Harry thought. Voldemort looked around at the circle, seeming quite pleased with himself.

"My heir," he said in that seductive voice again. "Tell me, how have you been serving me?"

The voice began haltingly, stiffly, a hoarse whisper that nonetheless carried like a shout in the cold air. Harry could not tell where he was from; sometimes he thought he could peg the accent, but then he would hear more and change his mind....

Thus began a litany of crimes, a paean to darkness and death the likes of which Harry had never heard. He stopped trying to determine who it was and where he was from; he was too horrified by the lurid descriptions of evisceration, the body counts...He found that he was shaking from head to toe as the narration of the heir's heinous activities continued; the words themselves had a chilling effect on his soul. Wars he had stirred up between Muggle nations...peace talks he'd scuttled...terrorism that brought centuries-old antagonisms between ethnic groups to a head once more...people framed for crimes they did not commit...doctors who had succeeded in finding cures for dread diseases, only to have their laboratories go up in mysterious fires, years of research gone in a puff of smoke...more civil wars than Harry could keep track of....

Voldemort chuckled over these. "Civil war is possibly the most fun of all. There is almost nothing I enjoy more than starting one and sitting back to watch families and neighborhoods implode....."

While the heir had recited a list of countries that were embroiled in civil war because of his interference, Voldemort smiled wickedly. He walked around the heir, looking up at the night sky dreamily, as if seeing more visions of death and despair in his imagination, and he found these sights quite pleasing. He returned to his starting point and looked pointedly at the hooded figure.

"You would do anything for me, would you not?" His voice was very soft.

The tall figure surprised Harry, and knelt before Voldemort. But he was still hooded.

"Anything, grandfather."

Harry fought back a gasp; the heir really *was* a blood relation! Voldemort's grandson, sowing mayhem and discord throughout the Muggle world. He thought about the wars--civil and otherwise--about which he'd heard. He was quite certain that he didn't remember a number of these conflicts from his old life.

"Anything?" Voldemort said again. "Absolutely anything?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Voldemort nodded and crossed his arms; he paced back and forth before the kneeling figure. "I am glad to hear that, because there is a very, very important thing that you must do for me."

"Name it and it shall be so."

Voldemort chuckled. "How eager you are now. I remember how reluctant you were at first, how I had to put you under Imperius for you to make the simplest mischief....But I knew that once you had a taste of it, once you knew the thrill...If I recall, you were even reluctant to acknowledge me as your grandfather. Of course, until I visited my servants at your school, I did not even know that I had a daughter...and then I learned that the school had a Parselmouth. Like me. A rare gift, and one with secrets that no one will ever know who does not share the gift..."

He knows, Harry thought. Then, feeling stupid, Of course he knows! He knows that snakes have the Sight. But where is his snake?

"Parselmouths are rare. And then when I saw your mother...saw that she was the spitting image of her own mother, well...I knew what had occurred. I had a powerful witch for a daughter, another Parselmouth, and she had given me a grandson...You've wondered, haven't you, whatever became of your mother, why you haven't seen her for some years now..."

The figure kneeling before him did not answer; Harry did not know what to make of many of Voldemort's statements. *He's showing off again, he thought.*

"She did the same thing for me I am asking of you this night. She served me well; like you, with every bit of dark magic, every bit of killing and torturing, she became more and more powerful, until finally...." He didn't finish his sentence. So, Harry thought, this was the real result of my mother living, Harry thought. Voldemort's heirs egged on to commit crime after crime, to foment war and unrest, to thwart the cure of the most feared diseases.....

Voldemort's voice dropped to a whisper. "It makes you feel very very powerful, does it not? Knowing you have someone's life in your hand....Other wizards can--and will--do for me what you are doing," he said looking around the circle again. "But it is most potent when it is a blood relation. Your mother's power was added to my own. She did it willingly, out of devotion to me, her dear father. And you will also, will you not?"

"Yes, grandfather," the voice sounded, softer now. Harry was holding his breath again. What was he asking his heir to do? Would he be able to see his face soon?

"Do you do this willingly?" his grandfather asked softly. "Do you freely give your power to me?"

The voice was firm. "I do."

His power? Harry puzzled. Can a wizard do that? he wondered. Just--give it? What would happen to the heir when he had done this? Would he no longer be a wizard? Harry looked uncertainly at Draco beside him; what was going on? Harry wished he could see some of the other faces in the circle, but every last Death Eater wore his hood up, obscuring facial features.

Harry felt his heart beating faster and faster; he swallowed as Voldemort backed up and brought out his wand, pointing it at the kneeling figure.

"*Succidero!*" he cried, and the blazing silver light that erupted from his wand pierced the heir in the upper chest; the man gave an earsplitting scream that Harry would never forget; it was worse than Karkaroff experiencing the Hara Kiri curse, it was worse than the sound of speeding death when his father and Cedric Diggory were murdered; Harry had never heard anything like it and hoped never to again. He wished with all his heart that he could put his hands over his ears to shut it out, but even if he thought he could get away with doing this, somehow his hands were frozen at his sides. He felt completely paralyzed and helpless, watching the silvery blade of light slice down through the man's clothes and body, watching the pool of blood that was beginning to stain the ground until it formed a viscous puddle around him; and yet still the victim knelt; he did not collapse.

Harry wanted to look away, but he dared not. At the very least, he owed his attention to this dying man. *See what you've done!* his brain cried out to him. *Don't look away; take a good look! This is all your fault!* His gorge rose, and he fought the urge to vomit onto the frosted grass at his feet. *How could Voldemort do this? To his own grandson? Is this what he did to his own daughter? After they both committed so many heinous acts on his behalf?*

Why he thought there was any honor among thieves at this point, he didn't know. *Thieves? No; murderers, torturers, terrorists...* He doggedly kept his eyes focused on that growing pool of blood; the body finally collapsed back on itself, weak from blood loss, but a flap of fabric from the hood lay across the man's face and Harry still could not see who it was.

He had a clear view now of the impossibly straight incision down the man's front; it was this wound that was allowing the blood to escape in

buckets. Suddenly, Voldemort stopped the cutting and pointed his wand at the chest hole, crying, "*Cor ex maleficum!*" The heart extracted itself from the man's body, emerging from the chest cavity dripping blood. It moved toward Voldemort; he kept his wand trained on it. As it floated in the air before him, and his grandson's corpse continued to leak life onto the frozen ground, he turned to those in the silent circle, smiling.

"Again!" he cried triumphantly. "Again I benefit from your scholarship, my servant, from your astute research..." He gave a small nod to a figure of medium height wearing a dove-grey cloak. This man bowed deeply to his master in return for the recognition. "Were it not for you, I would not know of this ancient ritual. I would not know of the power I can gain by partaking of the body of my servant and heir after he willingly submits to me...The power of the willing sacrifice! Most of you saw how my strength was increased by my daughter's gift to me. Now I will show just how generous a master I am..." He smiled again, turning around and looking at the different figures forming the circle. "I am not the only one who will partake of this, my heir's body. You are all invited to share it with me. We shall all increase in power and strength, due to his sacrifice, and soon there shall be no force that can stop us!" His voice rose hysterically; Harry felt the urge to throw up again. *Cannibalism!* He was proposing *cannibalism!* Human sacrifice and cannibalism! His mind was reeling. *No,* he thought. *I can't do that; and the heir...even after what he said he did, even he doesn't deserve this. But what can I do? How can I stop it?*

Harry's mind raced; he felt like he had no time at all to figure out what to do. It was all going so *fast!* If only he had more time--

Time!

That was it! And without stopping to consider it any further, Harry slipped his hand into his cloak pocket; he felt the wood of his wand resting there, cold in the cold night. He wrapped his fingers around it and did what he had done before in the entrance to Hermione's building. He thought about moving very, very fast, thought about every quick and speedy creature he could bring to mind, and then, hand still inside his pocket, he pointed the wand at his own leg, saying softly but adamantly, "*Tempus fugit!*"

Harry looked around. Voldemort had been giving a gloating look to the people to Harry's left; he had not been taking notice of Harry himself. Now he seemed to be frozen in this position as Harry tentatively took a step forward, hoping that Voldemort was not immune to the spell when cast by other people. No one stirred; the wind had utterly ceased. It was quiet as the grave. Harry realized that he no longer heard the sound of the waves crashing on the rocks below. He was tempted to go look at the stilled sea, but he had work to do. He had been unable to save the heir (who *had* done horrible, horrible things, he reminded himself) but he *could* save the heir from being cannibalized, and save everyone present--Death Eaters and spies alike--from participating in an unspeakable act. But how to do

it? he wondered. He dared not perform another spell, lest the *Tempus fugit* spell be terminated. Whatever he did, he would have to do by hand. He contemplated the bloody, open body; he had been strengthening himself through his morning runs and exercises, but he'd only been at it for four months, and he'd slacked off a bit after breaking his legs. How was he going to get the body away? How could he bury it in such cold, hard ground? He had nothing with which to dig a grave....

He was starting to panic, wondering whether there was in fact anything he could do at all. He cursed his impulse to try to help. How could he help? He was one sixteen-year-old boy, against dozens of Death Eaters and a powerful Dark Wizard growing more powerful all the time, so that he didn't even think twice about killing and *eating* the bodies of his own daughter and grandson, as long as it would make him stronger!

Harry sat down on the cold ground, his head in his hands; he cried with helplessness, the sobs wracking his body. He looked up at the sky, at the stars that appeared to have been stopped in their wheeling dance. *Help me!* he cried out mentally to anyone or anything that might appear to assist him; but no aid miraculously appeared. He was utterly alone in the world, the only one in it moving or able to act in any way. He stood and walked to the edge of the cliff, looking down at the sea, at the paralyzed waves that had been crashing on the rocks which now stood still, like a single frame in a film about the English Channel. He wished that he could at least hear the sea when he was in this strange suspended time; he wished he could hear anything. He looked down, wondering whether he could penetrate the water if he jumped, or whether he would land on something like hard glass, which would only soften and claim his body if the spell were terminated, letting his corpse drift down into the watery depths...A burial at sea....

A burial at sea! That was it! All he needed to do was to get the heir's body to the edge of the cliff and send it down into the sea. Digging a grave was unnecessary. He ran back to the circle of Death Eaters and looked down at the body. He avoided walking in the puddle of blood. The heart was still floating in the air. In order to prevent Voldemort achieving any benefit from the willing sacrifice of his heir, Harry would have to replace the heart in the chest cavity before hurling the body into the sea. Harry looked at his hands; he had no gloves and no way to cleanse them, since he couldn't reach the water. He needed something else with which to hold the heart, to put it back. He looked desperately around the circle, finally lighting on the Death Eater in the dove-grey cloak, the one who had told his Master about this Old Magic, this sacrificial ritual. The wizard was wearing a scarf knotted around his neck. That will do, he thought. He strode purposefully over to the man, who was a couple of inches shorter than Harry. As he unknotted the scarf he glanced at the man's face under his hood, and almost fell over from shock.

It was Barty Crouch, Jr.

Harry tried not to flinch from the eyes that looked unseeing right at him; he took the scarf and walked back to Voldemort, plucking the heart out of the air and putting it back where it belonged, glad that the suspension of time meant that the blood had temporarily stopped flowing. He stood again, the bloody scarf in his hands, wondering what to do with it now. Crouch would surely see the blood on it when the spell was terminated....

And so would Voldemort.

Harry's head was pounding. Did he dare do this? What if Crouch was one of the operatives? *No, he told himself. None of them would have given Voldemort the information about this barbaric ritual....*

There was no way Crouch could be a spy, Harry thought. If he gets into trouble with Voldemort...it's probably no more than he deserves. Harry hesitated one more time before returning to Crouch with the scarf; this could be a death sentence for Crouch. If I don't put the scarf back now, if I throw it into the sea...it could be just as incriminating as putting it back. It's too late now, either way....

He returned to the son of the Minister of Magic and reached out for one of his hands; he put the scarf into it and closed the hand, so that the blood was now also on the hand. He had managed to keep his own hands free of blood. He returned to the heir's body, but he realized he would have to walk in the blood to get to the heir. Very carefully, he took off his shoes and socks; without the passage of time, there was no wind to exacerbate the cold, and he actually wasn't too uncomfortable.

Harry swallowed, looking down at the corpse, walking closer now, his feet making contact with the spilled blood; it was a little like walking on a plastic mat. He tried to draw the cloak around the chest more securely to hide the ghastly incision. Then he moved to the head; taking a deep breath, he moved the fabric of the hood out of the way, pinching it carefully between his thumb and forefinger. When he saw the young man's face, he could not help but gasp. *No!* his brain screamed. It couldn't be! So young, so young! What was he, nineteen or twenty? But then he forced himself to remember the horrible crimes he had been reciting, bragging to his grandfather. Had he really known what the sacrifice was? Had he truly given his life willingly for Voldemort? Harry tried to remember the last time he'd seen him, in his other life...*No, he said to himself sternly. Not now. It's too late now....*

The dark eyes were gazing vacantly up into the night sky, and Harry brushed his hand lightly over them, to close them properly. *He did horrible things, but no one deserves this.* Plus, at all costs, Voldemort must not benefit from this sacrifice. He had never been weakened by trying to kill Harry and failing; he must not grow stronger still. Harry was going to put a stop to it.

This, Harry felt, was why he needed to become a spy. This was why he was here on this midwinter's night; only he would dare use the magic necessary to keep Voldemort's power from growing, and to save them all from committing the unspeakable act that Voldemort had been proposing. He saw the faces of some other Death Eaters whose names he did not know, and their expressions, frozen as they were in a split second of time, revealed that even Death Eaters did not necessarily want to live up to their name in quite such a literal fashion.

He put his arms under the corpse's shoulders and dragged it through the circle, to the edge of the cliff; there was no blood trail, because the blood did not flow in this strange time, but the heels of the corpse dug into the turf, marking it with two unmistakable lines. Harry stared down into the sea again, wondering whether Voldemort would be able to retrieve the body with a spell. But then he remembered that running water stops magic. Surely the sea counted as running water, didn't it? That was why magical creatures could live in the lake at Hogwarts; a lake was still water. And that was why the ferry that had taken them to France hovered above the water; if it rested *in* the water, they would have to power it using Muggle means or use sails like an old-fashioned ship. The ferry needed to be away from the water in order to function, but having it down so close to the water made it seem as though it was a Muggle vessel, as they didn't want to fly it high in the sky and risk notice by Muggle aviation authorities. It was dangerous enough flying broomsticks these days, with all of the Muggle air traffic....

Harry shook his head to clear it. Running water. This should do it. *Voldemort wouldn't be able to retrieve the body* He took a deep breath and grasped the dead young man under the arms and flung him off the cliff with all his might, grunting, then windmilling his arms to keep his balance. Harry watched the body plummet; when it struck the water, the spray that shot up did so slowly, as though it were straining, under the spell. Harry was panting still from his effort, watching the corpse disappear into the deep.

At last, he turned slowly back to the circle of Death Eaters. He put his socks and shoes on again and prepared to return to his place and end the spell. But then he had a thought: *I have Voldemort right where I want him*. He walked over to the tall wizard, stared up into his frozen, inscrutable face. The dark wizard was grinning maniacally, extremely pleased with himself. He did not yet know that his grandson, heart and all, was at the bottom of the English Channel. He did not even know that Harry was standing a mere foot in front of him, that Harry could kill him if he wanted to....

If? Harry thought. Don't I?

He thought then of the terrible things the heir had done in service to his master; he thought of the werewolf camp and the girls Stuart had heard

giving birth; he thought of the Muggle-born witches and wizards who didn't know what they were....

And he knew that he couldn't kill Voldemort. He had been trying to improve this world, but he also knew that if he could, he should still try to change it back. He'd been avoiding thinking about it because he still had no idea *how* to do it. How could on earth could he ever convince Voldemort to return to the night when his father was killed and let his mother die too, when that would mean his near-destruction? It didn't seem possible, but it would be even less possible if Harry killed him. Then there would never be a way for him to correct the timeline, even assuming there was any convincing argument he could ever offer to Voldemort. After all, it had to be him; he had the brother to Harry's wand, and the spell would be most potent with brother wands.

His eyes landed on the wand; an idea prickled at the back of his mind, finally blossoming into something like a plan. *Voldemort's wand!* Yes, he thought. I need to take his wand. Then *he* won't be as effective, and maybe I can find someone else to use the wand, someone else to perform the spell. Or I can try to convince him by--by holding his wand hostage! Or something...Still without a concrete plan other than taking Voldemort's wand, he plucked it from Voldemort's hand and ran to the edge of the circle, then realized that he couldn't just stand there with it in his *pocket*. He had to hide it, somehow....

He stood in thought, working through a plan of action for some time. Finally, when he knew what he was going to do, he moved as quickly as possible, mindful of the fact that he'd been under the spell for some indeterminate time; it had to be approaching an hour or more. His body had already aged an additional ten-thousand hours; how many days was that? Months? It wasn't the time to work it out; he had to act quickly....

He went round the circle, taking wands out of witches' and wizards' pockets, comparing them to Voldemort's wand, moving on when it was different enough that it wouldn't do. Finally, a middle-aged wizard had one of wood dark enough to pass for Voldemort's, and it was only a fraction of an inch shorter. Harry returned to Voldemort with the other wand and placed it in his hand. He shivered when he touched the large, pale hand, making sure it was wrapped securely around the alien wand. Then Harry ran from the circle, his eyes darting over the landscape, trying to find what he had pictured in his mind's eye.

Finally, about two-hundred feet from the circle, he found what he was looking for: a rock that had been thrust up from the earth in some earlier time, white and chalky, large enough to be seen from the air. *I have to see this from the air*, he thought. Next he scrambled around looking for smaller, more portable rocks. Running around over a good acre of land, at least, he finally found six, and returned to the larger rock with them one at a time. The smallest was the size of a grapefruit, the largest more like

a Bludger. Harry used the rocks themselves to dig down into the soil, embedding the six of them next to the large rock so that from the air it would appear to have a curving tail. He'd decided that a straight line would be too conspicuous.

When he had created the curved line with the rocks, he lifted the third one and put Voldemort's wand against the soil he'd softened there; he pushed downward with all his might, hoping that the wand would merely cut through the soil and not break. As it sank lower and lower into the earth, he found it to be more and more difficult, until finally, he had to use the rock itself to carefully hammer the wand in the rest of the way. He then replaced the rock over it, in the trough that he had dug.

Only he knew where Voldemort's wand was now. Only he could find it.

He returned to the circle, exhausted, but he couldn't break the spell yet. He couldn't just leave one wizard holding a bloody scarf and another wizard--whom he did not know--wandless. He needed to sow mayhem and confusion. He reached into the pocket of the wizard next to Crouch and took his wand, giving it to the man whose wand Voldemort was holding now. He took an old witch's wand and gave it to that man; he traveled around the circle, swapping wands back and forth between people; in the end he would leave Crouch wandless, since he was still the only person other than Lucius Malfoy that Harry was thoroughly convinced could not be an operative (and, as much as he hated Lucius Malfoy, he was his best friend's dad).

At one point, he was shocked to see a Hogwarts teacher in the circle. And that it was *this* teacher! But he couldn't dwell on things like this; he had to keep moving. Then, when he was still rearranging the wands, he looked up into the face of yet another familiar person and gasped.

Bill Weasley!

Could he be an operative? And next to him was--Percy! Was he an operative too? Just in case, he switched their wands with each other, so it wouldn't be difficult for them to right the wrong. So who were the operatives, then? he wondered. Dumbledore mentioned someone twenty--that would be Percy. He also mentioned two eighteen-year-olds. Could he have meant the twins?

But then--he found the other operatives in question. He was quite sure of it. He found Arabella Figg, and gave her Barty Crouch's wand. Niamh Quirke and Roger Davies were standing next to each other, as though they still needed to stay together because of both being from Ravenclaw. *Roger!* Harry thought. How can he do this, with Katie just having given birth to his child...Of course, he might be doing this to keep Katie safe. Still....if anything happened to Roger, Katie's child would be fatherless. Harry reeled; it had occurred to Harry that Roger could be a *real* Death

Eater, in his old life; it had never occurred to him that Roger could be an operative. I guess I was wrong, he reflected. But then he saw another face, another eighteen-year-old, and he froze. He was still alive! Harry remembered. But--did that mean *he* was an operative? Did that mean either Niamh or Roger *wasn't* a spy?

Harry just stood looking at him for some time, finally deciding to leave him with his own wand, in case he worked for Dumbledore (even people he knew were probably really Death Eaters he left with their own wands; he wanted about half of the people present to be unaffected by the wand switch, under the assumption that it would create even more confusion that way.) The last time he had seen him alive was when they had arrived in the graveyard after touching the Triwizard Cup simultaneously....

Harry finally bade a silent farewell to Cedric Diggory, whose pale eyes glittered in the moonlight, and whose mouth was curled slightly at the corner, as though he were *not* looking forward to participating in the ritual Voldemort had proposed. At last, Harry took Draco's wand and put it in his own pocket, then he put his stepfather's wand in Draco's pocket. He quickly broke the spell and surreptitiously slipped his wand into his dad's cloak. He felt the cold wood of Draco's wand under his fingers. The sound of the crashing waves had returned.

It took only a moment for all hell to break loose.

Voldemort's enraged cry sundered the heavens when he saw the body and heart gone; people Harry had seen with ruthless, avid expressions frozen on their faces recoiled in fear as he spun in a circle, seeking out the perpetrator of this hoax. He looked down at the ground, seeing where the body had been dragged to the cliff. Then--

His eyes landed on Harry.

He swallowed. The tall wizard still grasped the borrowed wand in his hand; he did not seem to notice that it wasn't his, since it was similar enough. Harry tried to look as shocked as the other people around him. In very few strides, Voldemort was standing over him. Harry wondered whether the killing curse could be done properly with someone else's wand. Harry knew why Voldemort thought of him first, since he had seemed suspicious of Harry calling the memories of his other life "dreams." He obviously didn't believe him. But surely, Harry thought, surely *someone* else who served Voldemort, someone who had perhaps participated in the kidnapping ring that separated the Weasley girls from their parents, surely one of *them* also knew the *Tempus Fugit* spell. Surely he couldn't be the *only* one present who knew of it, other than Voldemort....

"Hand me your wand, Potter!" he hissed softly.

Harry mumbled, "Yes, my Lord," and took Draco Malfoy's wand from his cloak pocket. Voldemort performed the *Priori Incantatem* on the wand, finding that the last spell it performed had been a locking charm. Harry remembered Draco locking up his trunk with his wand after they'd dressed for the initiation.

"Hmph!" he said contemptuously, as though he should have known that Harry would be too stupid and unimaginative to pull a stunt like this. Harry received the wand again, but the strange eyes still looked at him suspiciously, and moved back and forth between him, his dad, Draco and Draco's dad, looking like he was wondering, wondering....

"My Lord!" a voice called across the circle.

He turned quickly, his dark cloak whirling out from his body. He strode to the man who had spoken, who was standing next to Barty Crouch, Jr.

"My Lord! He has blood on him!" the man cried, holding out Crouch's arm, his hand still clutching the scarf, which had been grey, but now had dark red blood dripping from it onto the ground. Luckily, the ground was so hard that Harry had not left any footprints as a record of his activities.

"Give me your wand!" Voldemort commanded the pale man, his yellow hair looking as though it might very well turn white from fright at any second. Crouch reached into his pocket, looked up with a panicked expression, then searched his other cloak pocket; when that also turned up empty, he patted down his body, his panic blossoming into abject fear.

"My--my Lord--I--I cannot seem to find--"

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort cried, pointing the wand he was holding at Crouch, who fell to the ground, convulsing, as Harry saw that it was possible to do this with a wand that was not your own. *Ron put the curse on me with my own wand*, he remembered. But perhaps it's still not as strong...

Crouch continued to writhe on the ground, a scream ripped from his lips that overpowered the sound of the sea. Harry winced; *Please, he prayed. Please stop it....*

As though he had read his mind, Lucius Malfoy cleared his throat and said tentatively, "My Lord--"

Voldemort broke the bond between the wand and Crouch, who continued to lie prostrate on the frosted ground, his breath escaping him in bursts of white. Voldemort glared at Draco's father, who stuttered out his request sounding very, very frightened.

"My Lord--the Portkey my son used to come here will activate again in a matter of minutes. He will not be able to return to school unless--"

"Silence!" was his answer; Harry's hair stood up on the back of his neck. Voldemort considered him again, then Draco, who was quaking visibly. Finally, he sneered at them, and at Severus Snape also.

"Take the children back to their school," he said contemptuously to Harry's stepfather. "I know where to find them when I have need of them." He met Harry's eyes again, and Harry tried to look visibly scared, instead of gleeful that the plan seemed to have worked. He swallowed; then another cry went up from circle.

"This isn't my wand!" And then other voices joined in. "This isn't my wand, either!"

Voldemort turned away from them; for a second, Harry had been able to see the expression on his face. He appeared disgusted by what passed for dark witches and wizards these days, as though he'd been saddled with a kindergarten....

His dad pulled the tin of deviled ham from his robes again and said to them softly, "Hold on tight, boys." Harry was glad they were going, before Voldemort began to test every wand in the circle and discovered the last spell that had been performed by the wand in his dad's pocket. He didn't think he would ever feel grateful to Lucius Malfoy, but he did now. Granted, he was only looking out for his own son, but still....

When the Portkey activated (it actually took about five minutes) the last thing Harry saw before he began to tumble through space was a crowd of Death Eaters running about comparing wands, and Voldemort standing at the edge of the cliff, staring down into the waves, knowing he could not retrieve his heir's body. And Barty Crouch, Jr. lay on the cold earth, unmoving, the bloody scarf clutched in his hand....

* * * * *

Harry stumbled and fell to the floor of the Slytherin common room when he landed. His dad and Draco both stumbled too, Draco falling backward over a footstool near the hearth. Harry knelt, getting his breath, then stood slowly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Draco's wand.

"Isn't this your wand, Draco?" he asked, trying to sound innocent. His best friend looked at it through narrowed eyes.

"Yeah, I guess it is. I wonder whose this is, then?" he said, holding up the wand that had been in his pocket.

"Doesn't that look like yours, dad?" Harry asked him. His stepfather held it carefully, turning it over, then observing some scratches near the tip.

"Yes, yes it does seem to be mine..." He took out the wand that had been in *his* pocket and surveyed it.

"That looks like mine," Harry said, trying to sound casual. His dad looked at him oddly, as though he'd never seen Harry before. He looked like he was about to say something, but Draco interrupted.

"Well, I'm just glad *that's* over! I couldn't *believe* it, the way he just killed his own grandson! And then he was going to have us all--"

"Ssshhh!" Severus Snape said quickly, an angry scowl on his face. "Will you be quiet! You cannot discuss what happened tonight! With *anyone*! There is no way of knowing whether you can be heard..."

Draco grimaced. "Sorry. I didn't think..."

"No, Malfoy, you *didn't*. Now *there's* a surprise," he remarked sarcastically. Harry however, was surprised at the nasty edge to his stepfather's voice, and that he called Draco by his last name. Perhaps they were just all on edge. The experience they'd just had....It was enough to make the most reasonable person lash out.

Draco looked cowed before his professor, head of house and best friend's dad. Harry felt the need to step in.

"Dad--he just got the Mark. Take it easy on him," he said softly. His stepfather looked uninterested in cutting the son of Lucius Malfoy any slack, however. He turned to Harry, concern showing on his face now.

"How are you, Harry? Still feeling much pain?"

Harry pulled back his sleeve and touched his arm tentatively. "Stings a little. Do you think--do you think I could come up to your rooms with you? To sleep? That way you wouldn't be alone either. You know, since Mum stayed at the house tonight. And maybe--maybe we can call mum. Let her know I'm all right." He spoke softly, hoping his dad didn't suspect he had anything to do with the chaos at the Death Eater meeting. Even though he had prevented them from partaking of the body of the heir, he *had* performed dangerous dark magic. *The heir*. Harry shuddered again, remembering the things he said he'd done. How can I find out how bad it is in the Muggle world? he wondered. Then suddenly, he remembered; he'd put a newspaper in his pocket when he was at Maggie's and Bernard's. He had put it in the drawer of his bedside chest when he'd returned.

His dad nodded. "Of course. Good idea."

"I just want to get something from the dorm."

He ran ahead of Draco to the sixth-year boys' dorm and found the paper right where he'd left it, calling goodnight to Draco as he rushed past him. (Draco was staggering toward their dorm.) When they were in the corridor, Harry said, "Shouldn't we go see Dum--I mean, Davy? To let him know what happened?" His dad shook his head. "I happen to know he is abroad doing other things tonight. I will tell him when he returns. Don't you worry about it." After that, Harry and his dad were silent on the long walk upstairs. Harry felt his heart thumping quickly, as he wondered what he would find in the paper he'd stuffed in his pocket.

He hadn't been to the staff quarters in years. He remembered living there when he was small, running around the adjacent courtyard and flying toy broomsticks. When they reached the unicorn tapestry that hid the entrance to the staff wing, his stepfather pulled it aside and spoke a password Harry couldn't hear. The stones rearranged themselves to create a passage into the private realm of the Hogwarts professors and their families.

Harry followed his dad down the corridor to the familiar door with the legend, "Snape/Evans" on a small metal plaque. Upon entering, they found themselves in a cozy sitting room. His dad quickly lit a fire in the grate. Harry collapsed on the couch, exhaustion setting in. Perhaps he would look at the paper in the morning....

Severus Snape reached for the powder on the mantel, kept in a small intricately carved bowl, and threw it in the fire, saying, "Hog's End." Harry had never liked the name of their Hogsmeade house, but it had been known by that name for over a hundred years. There was no helping it now.

After a delay, his mother's head finally appeared in the flames. Her hair was askew; she'd probably been in bed for hours. Her face was very anxious.

"Harry! Severus! Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Mum, we're fine. We just wanted to check in and let you know."

She looked relieved. "Thank goodness! I tried getting some sleep...but all I could do was toss and turn, thinking about you..."

Harry's heart ached, seeing how worried she was for him. He remembered what his parents had said when he was seven...

"I can't accept that in nine or ten years, they're just going to take Harry from me, and there's nothing I can do; I can't be there to make sure he's safe--"

"I'll be there, Lily. I'll take care of him. I always have done."

That time had finally come, and he wondered that she ever got any sleep at all. He tried to take her mind off it now, consulting with her on what to get Jamie and the twins for Christmas, hearing her frustrations over the house-elves. At length, she told him she loved him and they both said good night. His stepfather hadn't spoken to her, but had stood in the doorway to his bedroom, hands deep in his pockets, face inscrutable.

"Would you like something to drink before you turn in?" his dad asked now. Harry nodded, and with a wave of his stepfather's wand, there appeared on the table before him a steaming mug of hot chocolate. Harry picked it up carefully and sipped it; he hadn't exactly been around dementors, but it was an evil such that chocolate was probably a very good idea right now.

When he had drained his mug, his father said, "You can use your old room, Harry. Don't worry about getting up early; it's Sunday. Sleep as late as you wish. Good night." Apparently his stepfather wasn't interested in discussing the initiation. Harry didn't push it; it might very well have brought up bad memories of when *he* had received the Dark Mark.

"Night, Dad." Harry watched him close the door, then rose and crossed the room to the small chamber which he and his sister had shared when they were very young and still slept in cots with mobiles hanging above them. He opened the door and the candles in the wall sconces flared to life; he was surprised to find the small room fitted out with a large bed flanked by small chests of drawers. They must use it for a guest room, he thought. But who would come to stay? Uncle Duncan? Possibly. Maybe Remus used to come before he was taken away....

Harry didn't expend any more mental energy thinking about it. He undressed down to his drawers and climbed into the bed, placing his wand on one of the tables and picking up the newspaper he'd brought back from London. It was only a small portion; Maggie's horoscope column was mixed in with various fluff pieces and film and television reviews, and he'd also managed to get part of the sports section. Damn! He'd hoped he could find some political news, learn about those civil wars and peace talks the heir had affected. But then he found something interesting in the sports pages: in World Cup coverage, football teams for both East and West Germany were listed. *The Berlin Wall fell about five years ago*, he thought. Or was it six? Either way, there was just one Germany now. Or was there? Had the heir interfered with that? Or had the circumstances for the destruction of the wall simply never occurred in this timeline?

He scanned the paper some more and found a story about a steroids scandal that was still unresolved from the summer Olympics; in a list of athletes suspected of using steroids (it spanned several sports) he found the USSR listed over and over as a country from which some of the dubious athletes hailed. (There were also athletes from Canada, the

United States, Great Britain, France and others; it seemed to be alarmingly wide-spread.)

So, the Soviet Union was still in existence, and there had been no German reunification. Perhaps there was no European Union. He wondered whether there was still apartheid in South Africa, and who the American president was. He realized suddenly that he didn't even know who the British prime minister was!

He spent some time going over every page with a fine-toothed comb, learning whatever he could about the outside world. In the end, he knew: his mother being alive had had ramifications far beyond the wizarding world. Significant historical events had failed to take place, or had happened differently, since the night in 1981 when Voldemort had killed his father. But the smaller events caused him to suffer pangs of guilt as well. He winced when he saw in the steroid article that a young gymnast (only thirteen years old) suspected of being given steroids by her coach was orphaned four years ago when her parents tried to escape from East Germany into West Germany....

When he had learned all he could from few pages he'd brought back from London, he extinguished the candles, placing his glasses and the paper on the chest next to his wand. He put his head on the pillow and tried to sleep, but sleep didn't come for a very long time; he put aside thoughts of the newspaper for now, but the events of the evening played out over and over in his mind, and he wondered each time whether he'd done the right thing....

* * * * *

When Harry opened his eyes on Sunday morning, it was almost time for lunch. The clock on the mantel said eleven-forty-five. Harry groaned; somehow, even though it was late, he didn't feel well-rested. And he still needed to see Jamie and Ginny, to let them know he was all right. And Ginny...what could he say to her? Should he tell her he'd seen Bill and Percy there? Should he tell Charlie? Or Ron?

He pulled on the same clothes he'd worn the previous evening and put his glasses on last. But when he picked up the newspaper from the chest next to the bed, he noticed something odd; underneath it was a novel, a Muggle thing, a book he'd seen his mother reading and rereading many times over the years; it seemed to be one of her favorites. Oddly, for one who disliked the cloak-and-dagger nature of her husband's work for Dumbledore, she seemed to enjoy reading Muggle espionage novels. He had a feeling that this was her favorite, based on how dog-eared the pages were, how bent the once-glossy cover had become.

It was her old copy of a John LeCarre spy novel she liked to read repeatedly. Harry had read it once, during an idle summer a couple of

years earlier, between times when she was miraculously not reading it. He'd enjoyed it, but had thought that living that kind of life seemed very unfulfilling and frustrating. There were so many grey areas.

He wondered why his mother liked this book better than the others he knew she read by the same author. Perhaps it was because this one traced the life of a spy from his very early childhood, showed exactly how he'd come to be on the path that led him to covert operations. Frankly, that was one thing about the book that had seemed rather depressing to him, as though this man had been irretrievably destined for this life, with no choice about it at all....

But then he had another revelation, as he opened the top drawer and saw numerous other things belonging to his mother. *Was his mother sleeping in here now?* he wondered. *Had his mum and dad taken to using separate bedrooms?*

Children usually try not to think about what their parents do in bed at night, but somehow thinking about them *not* being in the same bedroom (and the implications of that) was even more disturbing than thinking about what they did whey they *were* together. He replaced the worn novel on the table and left the room, hoping he was wrong, hoping that his mother simply liked to get away to read in here sometimes, a nice quiet place which seldom saw guests these days....

His dad was already gone from the rooms, and Harry let himself into the corridor leading to the tapestry-covered entrance to the staff wing.

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

He turned to find Charlie Weasley striding toward him, a grin across his freckled face, having just closed the door to his own rooms.

"I, uh--I was just keeping Dad company last night. Mum stayed in the village, getting the house ready for the holiday."

Charlie nodded. "My mother is fanatical about the holiday. Wants everything just so, and then the twins start in on their mischief..."

Harry grinned. "Sounds familiar."

Charlie laughed. "Right! Stuart and Simon seem like they've been to the Gred and Forge Academy of Twin-Induced Chaos." His smile relaxed into an expression of concern as he asked, "How is Stu, by the way?"

Harry drew his lips into a line; he just realized that he'd been so preoccupied by his impending initiation, he didn't know.

"He'll be home for the holiday," he said, taking a guess.

"Good, good. You slept late, didn't you? Coming down to lunch now?"

"In a minute. I wanted to talk to Sirius about something." Maybe he'll know how Mum and Dad are doing, Harry thought. Sirius was very close to his mother; he thought briefly of asking Dumbledore about it since he was probably his dad's closest friend, but somehow he didn't get the impression his dad and Dumbledore talked about his dad's marriage.

"You can't talk to Sirius," Charlie told him. Harry frowned.

"Why not?"

"He's not here. In fact, as far as I know, he never came back from the village last night."

Harry felt deflated, but then hopeful again. *Perhaps he stayed at our house to help Mum, and she confided in him...* If anything, it made it more likely that he might know whether something was wrong in the Snape/Evans marriage.

"Well, if he comes to lunch, maybe I can talk to him afterward."

Charlie shrugged. "I don't see why not."

They went down to the Great Hall together and Harry walked to the Slytherin table casually, unprepared for the greeting he would receive from his sister. He slipped unobtrusively into the seat next to her and tapped her on the shoulder, upon which she turned around and threw her arms around his neck with an inarticulate cry. Harry felt strangled.

"Aaack! Jamie! You're choking me!" Then he added in a whisper, "And people are staring..." He met Blaise Zabini's eyes across the table; Zabini looked unmistakably *envious*. Harry didn't know what Zabini's parents looked like; had they been in that circle of Death Eaters last night? Had they sent him an owl that morning saying, *Harry Potter's already been initiated. Why hasn't the Dark Lord asked us to bring you to a meeting?*

Harry looked away from Zabini, and Jamie pulled back abruptly. He saw now that her eyes were red; she seemed thoroughly miserable. "You great prat!" she said thickly. "Making me worry like this..."

"Didn't Draco tell you--" he whispered to her.

"Yes, but I still--oh, it makes a great difference to actually see you!" she whispered fiercely. He patted her back affectionately.

"I'm fine, James. We'll talk later." Then he realized that his mother might have confided in her, and he said softly, "I have something to ask you about, too. It has nothing to do with last night."

She rolled her eyes. "If you're going to warn me off Draco again--" she said out of the corner of her mouth, reaching for some stew.

"No. It's to do with Mum and Dad."

She furrowed her brow as she ate. "Mum and Dad?"

"I'll explain later," he said, helping himself to some roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

Later that afternoon, they received their exam grades, and Harry was shocked to see that he was at the top of his class in Dark Arts, Charms, Care of Magical Creatures and Transfiguration, and very close in Potions (Draco narrowly edged him out) and Ancient Runes. (He performed barely adequately in his other classes, not being any more interested in History of Magic or Astronomy in this life than he'd been in the other one.)

He met with Draco, Jamie and Ginny in the anteroom, and Ginny fell on him just as Jamie had, looking extremely relieved. Harry held her tightly, so glad to be with her again he didn't want to let her go, but at last, he released his hold on her. Haltingly, he told her and his sister about the initiation, trying to sound convincing when he feigned confusion about the disappearance of the heir. As he spoke, he noticed that Draco's eyes were narrowed, looking at him shrewdly. Harry went on anyway, wondering what his best friend was thinking.

He didn't tell them that he recognized the heir; he couldn't remember ever actually seeing him or even hearing of him in this life, and he was tired of people giving him funny looks when he remembered things from his old life he shouldn't know. They didn't ask anyway, simply assuming that he wouldn't know the heir's identity. But finally, Draco couldn't stand it any more and said, "All right, Harry, out with it. It was you who did it, wasn't it?"

Harry tried to look at him blankly. "Did what?"

"Why are you pretending with us? With *me*? You used that spell again, didn't you? The one you used to get Ginny back to Hogwarts."

Harry looked at the three of them grimly, and then nodded slowly.

"Harry!" Ginny cried, alarmed. "That's really dangerous. Do you want to kill yourself or something?"

He looked at them helplessly. "I--I couldn't *not* do it. And it wasn't for as long as it took for me to get back from London. I don't think so, anyway." He gazed round at them again. "Voldemort wanted us to--well, I already told you. I had a way to prevent it, and I used it. I didn't want to tell any

of you because--well, because I knew you'd react this way. I couldn't be selfish and let *that* happen. Did you *want* to become a cannibal, Draco?"

Draco recoiled. "No, of course not. But--you could have told me."

"I wasn't going to tell anyone. And don't tell my dad; if he knew I was using dark magic..."

"But why'd you switch all those wands? What was the point of that?"

Harry swallowed and looked at them very seriously. "Well, when Voldemort tested the wand I had in my pocket, it came up dry, didn't it? Because it was yours. And in the end, there was one wand missing. One very important wand."

"Yeah, I remember; you did something with that one fellow's wand--I couldn't see his face. So You-Know-Who couldn't test his wand to see if he'd done the spell, and that looked pretty bad for him, like he didn't want it tested. You-Know-Who *knew* which spell had been done, didn't he?"

Harry nodded. "Probably."

"Well, why'd he think it had to be you?"

Harry shrugged in what he hoped was a convincingly nonchalant way. "I dunno. Maybe because of the Prophecy."

Draco looked a little miffed. "I'm in the Prophecy. He didn't ask me."

Harry swallowed. "I guess he didn't get around to it. Remember; right after that, someone noticed the blood on the scarf."

"So," Ginny said softly, "you used the scarf to put the heir's heart back in his chest and flung his body into the sea so he wouldn't be cannibalized?"

Harry nodded, looking down.

Ginny didn't speak, but wrapped her arms around him again, pulling his head down onto her shoulder and stroking his hair with her hand. She kissed him on the cheek and released him again, but the look shining in her eyes made him feel prouder than he'd ever been in either of his lives; her expression of admiration was overwhelming, and he fought the urge to hang his head shyly, turning instead to Draco, to correct him.

"Actually," he informed his best friend, "the point of the wand-switching wasn't to leave that one Death Eater wandless. *His* isn't the wand that's missing."

"It isn't?"

"No. I--I stole Voldemort's wand."

Three jaws dropped at once.

"You *what?*" Jamie breathed.

"You're *kidding.*" Draco said, eyes round.

"Harry!" Ginny said, looking at him in awe.

"I hid it--don't ask me where. You're all probably safer if you don't know." He hoped he would eventually be able to find it again, flying overhead, watching for a configuration of rocks that resembled a large mouse with a curving tail....

Harry didn't discuss the other people he saw in the circle: Bill and Percy and Niamh and Roger and Cedric and Arabella Figg. He especially didn't mention the professor he'd seen; it was possible that the professor was an operative, but if that wasn't the case, it wouldn't do for the four of them to suddenly start acting strangely and raise suspicions. Harry would wait and see; he would be anxious, first, to see which teachers joined them in their General Strike.

Harry was glad when they moved on to discussing the strike; he both didn't think he could take any more admiring gazes from Jamie and Ginny (Draco was still looking a little put-out that Harry hadn't come clean from the start) and he didn't want to continue to think about the ghastly murder he'd seen. He was glad to listen instead to Ginny telling them all about a letter she'd received that morning from Maggie.

"She's found them!" she said practically jumping up and down with excitement. She pulled a paper out of her pocket. and read.

"Ruth Pelta--turns out she actually lives close to Hermione--and she's coming. She does folk singing and plays guitar, mostly for fun, but she also loves classical music and she's actually a fan of Hermione's. She was recently in a revue at her yeshiva. I think that's a school. Justin Finch-Fletchley's coming too. He's heard of Maggie, loves astrology. He was thrilled to hear from her. Alicia Spinnet's also coming, and Dean Thomas. Do you know it turns out he wants to go to art school in France? Or maybe Italy. Doesn't want to do football at all; he normally just plays for fun. All the football clubs are terribly upset about him, apparently. Maggie even found this Colin Creevey, but the term at his school has already ended and now he's on a ski trip in Switzerland with some friends. That other girl, Penelope Clearwater, she's at Oxford, but she's not available on Saturday. There's a wedding; she's her cousin's maid-of-honor or something. She's terribly smart, it seems. Into physics. Doing very complex maths--something about black holes, I think. I wonder what I

would ever talk to her about. She'd probably think I was a complete idiot...."

Harry counted them off on his fingers. "Okay, so that gives us Ruth, Justin, Alicia, Dean...Is that it? And of course, Hermione and Maggie. And they already know about being magical, of course. So who have we got going on our end?"

"The four of us, of course," she said, "plus Ron and Charlie and Liam. Ron said Cho can't; her family's going to Hong Kong to visit relatives until just before the New Year."

Harry nodded. "All right. I think we'll be fine. The most important person is Charlie; we need him to do some demonstrations; the rest of us could possibly get in trouble, doing magic out of school. Charlie's of age, so he's fine."

Jamie laughed. "We're telling Muggle-born witches and wizards that they *are* witches and wizards, and you're worried about getting in trouble for doing magic out of school?"

"What about when we went to London and you transfigured our robes?" Ginny pointed out. "And you certainly did magic out of school last night, didn't you? Dark magic."

Draco made a face. "I doubt the Ministry was monitoring that meeting. But London *is* pretty well-monitored. You know that now, Harry, after those two showed up at the museum. Ginny's right; you're pretty lucky you weren't caught transfiguring the robes. We could be getting Charlie in serious trouble, and he might wind up getting fired before the General Strike. I mean, you're asking him to do magic in front of Muggles; that's a worse offense than breaking the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Magic."

Ginny grinned. "But they're *not* Muggles, are they? They're witches and wizards. A little loophole in the law that they never bothered closing."

Draco still looked unsure about putting his friend at risk, but as Charlie's own sister seemed to think there wasn't a problem, he clamped his mouth shut and didn't comment further. Once the plans for the Saturday trip to London had been solidified, they broke up their meeting. Harry and Ginny went up to the Muggle studies classroom for some time alone together, while Jamie and Draco stayed behind in the anteroom. Harry was glad that the anteroom was a relatively cold, uncomfortable place.

The Muggle studies classroom was far more comfortable, but Harry and Ginny didn't do anything beyond a bit of kissing, and even wandering hands stayed resolutely on top of clothing, instead of burrowing beneath. He knew that for him, the memory of Katie giving birth was still very fresh

in his mind, and he suspected that it was for Ginny as well. Unless Ginny went to Madam Pomfrey for Prophylaxis Potion, they needed to be very, very careful. He did *not* want to risk Ginny becoming another Katie.

* * * *

Harry finished his Christmas shopping in the village on Monday, after he and Jamie had seen Draco, Ginny, Ron and Charlie off on the Hogsmeade Express along with the others who were not staying at the castle or in Hogsmeade for the holiday. He carried his purchases home and spent quite a while in his room wrapping them. Jamie was still out, doing her own shopping, and his dad was taking the twins to Diagon Alley to look for presents. He wasn't sure where his mother was; she was probably also shopping, he supposed.

After he was done wrapping the gifts and had placed them under the grand, glittering tree in the drawing room, he returned to the second floor, but he didn't go to his room. He turned instead to go to the guest room where Sirius was staying for the holiday. Maybe he knew something about the trouble between his parents. He still hadn't had an opportunity to speak to Jamie about it.

He was about to knock on the door when he realized that it was already slightly ajar, and he heard voices from within. His mother was already there, talking to his godfather. Well, Harry thought, perhaps I can hear about it right from her, then.

But there weren't any words to hear; there was merely a rustling and a sighing, a small giggle and then a moan, an *unmistakable* sort of moan, and in a blind rage, Harry held out his right hand in the direction of the door, flinging it open without laying a finger on it, and the thick oak split as it struck the wall, as though it were being propelled by a hurricane-force wind.

They both stared at him, thunderstruck, and Harry knew his fury must have shown on his face. They were still in each other's arms, mostly clothed. Sirius wore his trousers, but no shirt, his broad chest matted with dark fur that made his pale skin seem even paler. Of course, the pallor of his face *could* have been because of the murderous way his godson was looking at him.

Harry's mother had shed only her robes, but there were more buttons undone on her blouse than there should have been, and she pulled the fabric together now under her chin, her face as red as her hair.

Harry had no words. There was a pounding in his head as he looked back and forth between the two of them, and it seemed that the very air in the room crackled with his anger. Fearing that he would soon cause things to start flying around the room in a dangerous manner from his out-of-

control emotions, he turned on his heel and strode down the corridor, then the stairs, and out of the house. He thought he heard his mother called his name (and Sirius saying, "*Lily, let him go...*"), but he didn't let that stop him. He couldn't look at either of them; not right now.

Harry was so angry he couldn't see straight. He didn't know where he was going; the village where he'd lived all his life was suddenly alien territory, an uncharted wilderness with no safe haven. He leapt over the wall at the end of the High Street, next to his house, and began to run across the fields that led to the grounds of Hogwarts. These fields eventually met up with the Forbidden Forest, and when he reached the forest, he kept running, and only when he couldn't see anything but trees around him did he change.

The pain in his joints was nothing compared to the pain in his heart. After he transfigured, he kneaded dead leaves with his paws for a few minutes, shaking out his mane. His breath was white before his muzzle. Then he took a deep breath, the cold air stinging his lungs.

Harry began to run.

He ran and ran and ran in straight lines. He ran as he hadn't run since he was pursuing Wormtail through the forest, but this time he didn't need to corner and turn, following a rat Animagus. He could keep moving, keep the flowing movement going, only swerving slightly every so often to avoid running headlong into a tree. He also didn't need to worry about giants this time. It was possible that he *could* encounter other creatures, especially as it was growing dark, but the full moon had ended the night before, so werewolves were at least not a worry (if there were any that hadn't been captured by the Ministry). And he was a golden griffin; if he ran into a dragon he could have trouble (he was fairly certain he would encounter none), but few other denizens of the forest were equipped to take on a golden griffin. As darkness descended, Harry continued to run, until he had reached the far side of the stand of trees, where he'd never been before, and stopped to rest, panting.

He stayed within the trees' shelter, still in his Animagus form, and watched the stars winking on above the tiny town visible across numerous fields separated by hedgerows. *A Muggle town*, he realized. He'd never really thought about how close the nearest Muggles might be. Of course, this could hardly be called close. He had no idea how far he'd traveled, but it had to be a considerable number of miles. He stared at the distant houses with their television antennae and the street lamps that had sprung to life now that the sun had set. Electric lights glowed out from the windows with a harsh white glare never seen in Hogsmeade. Many of the houses looked crisp and unused; it must be a newly-built suburb, he thought. It had a feeling of *sameness*, of uniformity. He imagined the houses filled with people exactly like the nosy neighbors on Privet Drive--Aunt Petunia being the nosiest. And very suddenly and unexpectedly, an

overwhelming feeling welled up inside of him, and he actually began to shake.

He was homesick.

Harry longed with all his heart for his other life, for the world he'd left on September first. But it wasn't just that; he actually missed *Privet Drive*, he realized. And his aunt and uncle! And Dudley. Poor Dudley....except that his cousin was *alive* in this life. He tried to comfort himself with this knowledge, but he still didn't feel any better. Harry had never even met any of the Dursleys, in fact. It was such an odd thought. He grew suddenly nostalgic for bad chat shows and quiz shows and American comedies and nature documentaries and radio adverts with obnoxious jingles and the nauseating smell of the car when it had just rained and there was nothing but the stench of petrol in his nose, and the overwhelming peppermint odor of the candy display at the chemist's and the gritty, chalky smell of the school in Little Whinging where he'd gone when he was small, and the dusty road where he'd passed the cemetery every day, not knowing his parents were buried there...

He'd been in a little bit of the Muggle world recently, going to London to find Hermione and then taking Ginny to meet her, but he hadn't had the opportunity to just savor those things that were quintessentially *Muggle*. He suddenly longed quite madly for a fast-food hamburger or some greasy fish-and-chips wrapped in newspaper, or something from the Indian place where Mrs. Figg had bought dinner for him and Draco during the previous summer. Suddenly, he longed for candy that didn't bite back or leap about or make his nose flash blue for hours...

Eventually, the lights in the town became fewer and fewer. Harry watched the evidence of the Muggles going to bed, observed from a distance. A few lonely cars still moved about the streets, causing a soft shushing sound to reach his alert griffin's ears, telling him that the pavement was wet.

What would happen, he wondered, if I just walked away from it all? If I just changed back into a boy and left my wizard's robes and wand here and walked into that Muggle town and left the wizarding world behind? Would anybody really notice, or care?

But he knew the answer to that; his parents and siblings and friends would be frantic, searching all over for him. He remembered Mrs. Weasley's face when she had told him and Hermione about her daughters disappearing, and he knew that however angry he was with his mother, he could never do that to her, let alone the others, with whom he wasn't angry. And there was Ginny...always Ginny....

The moment of temptation had passed and he turned around, loping through the forest, wondering whether he would reach Hogsmeade by

morning at this much-slower speed (he must have been running very very fast, he realized). When he came to a large clearing, he gave up on walking and took advantage of the open space, spreading his wings and leaping into the air, turning as necessary until he was above the canopy of the trees; he could see the great castle in the distance, towers ablaze like beacons, and he moved toward that, since it was the only thing he had to guide him. How odd, he thought, that I can see it so clearly, and if a Muggle were looking right at it, he would see nothing but ruins....

At last, he was also able to spot the low-lying village; he landed in the garden behind his house, in the shadow of the greenhouse where his parents grew various magical plants they used in potions. The greenhouse also served as the potting shed, holding the gardening supplies they used during the summer when they grew fresh vegetables in the patch of ground just beyond the lawn that rolled down from the rear of the house (they usually did the planting during the Easter holiday, then his mother came down on weekends to do weeding until the term was over). Harry changed back into his human form in the lee of the greenhouse. He picked himself up from the ground and walked up to the house, lifting his feet quite high because the snow had not been cleared from the grounds; no path had been shoveled to the greenhouse from the back door, since they'd all been living at the castle for almost four months.

He paused with his hand on the knob. Peeking in through the glass at the top of the door, he saw that no one was in the scullery, not even a house-elf. He let himself in and immediately shed his wet shoes, socks and robes, padding softly on the cold floor, the edges of the slate tiles gently rounded from generations of wear.

The pantry came between the scullery and the kitchen, and he paused here to slice himself a thick slab of brown bread, which he spread liberally with strawberry jam. He walked into the drafty kitchen in his bare feet, carrying his plate, wetness showing at the bottoms of his jeans. A fire was blazing away in the huge stone fireplace, and Jamie was asleep on the couch near the hearth, the Christmas tree with their childish homemade ornaments standing guard over her. Harry seated himself in the chair by the fire, putting his feet as close to the flames as he dared, feeling a warmth pervade him from both the fire and from the comforting food he was eating. He watched his sister sleep, the firelight making her skin glow, and Harry's heart ached again, for he knew that he didn't just need to fix the timeline to heal his own homesickness and repair the political damage in the outside world, he needed to fix it on *principle*. And adhering to that principle would mean giving up Jamie. It would mean giving up other people too, but when he thought of his sister, he knew that she was who he would miss most of all. If he ever figured out how to do it....

Well, he'd taken a step, in a way. *I know where Voldemort's wand is, and Voldemort doesn't even know he doesn't have his proper wand. I think....*

It was possible, of course, that Voldemort *had* realized that he had a different wand, but even if he *did* realize it, Harry thought it unlikely he would be able to find his real one. If you don't know where something is, you can't use a summoning charm to find it. He knew that if you suspected where something was, it could still work (as when Mrs. Weasley pulled all of the Ton-Tongue Toffees and other prankish items from Fred's and George's clothing before they left for the World Cup), but he seemed to have successfully deflected suspicion onto the son of the Minister of Magic, and Crouch didn't know anything. Harry wondered again whether this had been the right thing to do, but he remembered the Pensieve, the night his parents had died; he remembered Crouch putting Cruciatus on Severus Snape, attacking him from behind, and treating the murders of his parents as some kind of entertainment. He decided to stop worrying about Barty Crouch, Jr.

When he was done his food, he leaned back in the chair, feeling warmer now, and stared at the flames, starting to drift off. He didn't think he'd been asleep, but he must have been, for when he opened his eyes, Jamie was gone from the couch and his stepfather was sitting there, looking at him quite grimly, and Harry met his gaze, knowing he'd probably worried them all, disappearing for hours....

"Harry? Are you awake?"

Harry nodded dully. "Where's Jamie?" he managed to mumble.

"I took her upstairs. Where were *you*? All your mother said was that you ran out of the house without a word. We've all been worried sick."

Harry felt the resentfulness boil up in him and burst to the surface. "Oh really? Was *she* worried too?" He saw his dad recoil at the sharpness in his voice. "Was *Sirius*? Or were they just worried that I'd--" He stopped suddenly, meeting his stepfather's eyes. Did he know? Should he say anything? He remembered again being in his Pensieve, the look on his face when he had lost the Quidditch final and saw Lily Evans and James Potter kissing on the pitch.

He felt a hand on his arm; it was Hermione. Her face was so sad, he didn't know what had happened. "Are you all right, Hermione?" he said with concern. She drew her mouth into a line.

"*Not me. Snape. Look at him, Harry.*"

Harry turned to Snape, walked around him and looked up at his face. Although only eighteen, he now looked like the man he was accustomed to seeing in Potions class; he had shaved his beard, but there was a slight shadow on his face as though he'd forgotten that day. His hair hung in his face, lank and

greasy, and his eyes were filled with a combination of contempt and sadness. He was miles away from the sixteen-year-old boy who'd declared his love for Harry's mother in the Potions Dungeon. He already looked like his life was over, like he was just biding time until some gruesome end. That, Harry thought, is the face of someone who has nothing to live for.

And, he remembered, it was on that day that Lucius Malfoy recruited him to be a Death Eater, to cultivate Barty Crouch, Jr. How can I do that to him? Harry thought. How can I tell him that his wife is carrying on with my godfather?

Harry's throat was tight; he took a deep breath. "Dad, can I ask you something?"

The dark eyes regarded him with curiosity. "Yes, Harry."

"When I woke up yesterday morning, I found--I found a lot of mum's things in my old room. Are--are you and mum sleeping in separate bedrooms?"

Severus Snape looked down at his hands, then up at Harry again. His voice was very soft. "You saw them together, didn't you?"

Harry's jaw dropped; he knew! He knew what they were doing in his own house, and he just carried on....Harry remembered Charlie saying that Sirius hadn't come back to the castle Saturday night. He must have stayed here, Harry realized, just Sirius Black and Lily Evans, no other humans in the house. He began seething on his stepfather's behalf, starting to feel the blind rage come over him again.

"Yes," he said quietly, still watching his dad's face carefully. The dark eyes closed, and he leaned back, then opened them again, fixing them on Harry.

"You think I'm bloody stupid, don't you?"

Harry shook his head vigorously. "No, of course not! I think they're--they're--I can't even say what I think without using every bit of foul language I've ever heard...."

His dad was remarkably calm. "Harry, Harry, please. I need to explain. Your mother and I--well, we've been apart, technically, for some time now. Yes, we use two different bedrooms at Hogwarts. We live there ten months a year now and we only live here for two, plus a few extra days here and there for holidays. It's fairly easy to live this way and not have anyone know...."

Harry remembered their wedding again, and other times they'd seemed to be quite happy. "But *why*?"

His dad sighed. "The nearest I can figure is--it's Stuart. He's very sick Harry, as you know. It's the sort of thing that can put a strain on any marriage, but with us--"

"She *blames* you for Stuart? How can she do that? Does she think *you* want to have porphyria? Bloody hell, no one would *want* such a thing, if they had a choice..."

He smiled ruefully. "That's just it; *she* had a choice. You don't remember; you were so young. After your father was killed, both Black and I came round quite often, helping her around the flat, helping her with you, spending time with her, comforting her. She was in a right state, and pregnant, to boot. I think it was just pure luck that I was with her when she went into labor with Jamie. She'd come with you to visit me at the castle. The two of you stayed in that room you and Jamie used to have. It was during a terrible snowstorm, and she wasn't due for another three weeks. Black was off somewhere on a mission for Dumbledore. I wound up helping Pomfrey with the midwifing; it happened very quickly. That's a very, er, intimate thing for two people to share. It gave me a leg up on Black, and the next thing you know, you and Lily had moved into my rooms in the castle with me, and then we found out she was expecting the twins, and we quickly threw the wedding together...." Harry had suspected his mother had been pregnant with the twins before her wedding to his stepfather, and now he knew for certain.

He shook his head. "So why are you staying together? I mean, it's not that I want you to split up, but--"

Severus Snape gave a great sigh. "That's because of Stuart too. We agreed that we both need to be there for him. It would not be good for his health to be fretting over our relationship."

Harry remembered Stuart in the hospital wing; he was so *knowing*. Somehow Harry doubted that Stuart of all people thought his parents' marriage was constant bliss. "I wouldn't be so sure the twins don't know already, Dad. They're pretty sneaky, and they're good at figuring things out. Not like me and Jamie; or me, anyway. I always thought everything was fine; I even knew Sirius stayed in the village Saturday night, and it never occurred to me...."

"Of course it didn't, Harry. That's not where your mind goes; you assume the best of people, not the worst. You always have done. Even when someone has shown themselves to be extremely untrustworthy, I've noticed that you want to continue to give them the benefit of the doubt."

Harry frowned. "Great. So I'm the stupidest sod in the wizarding world..."

"No, Harry. I've seen that you also know when not to trust. You're not stupid. You had no reason to think that your mother and Sirius...." He looked incredibly sad again, and Harry felt angry once more.

"Just when I was starting to like her again..." he grumbled to the fire.

"Well, that's the hard part, isn't it, Harry?"

He looked up at his dad, perplexed. "What?" Severus Snape stared into the fire, and the flames danced in his dark eyes. His dad looked both sad and happy all at once; Harry could see in his face that he was remembering another time in his life, a time when he had first noticed the woman he would eventually marry.

"I've loved Lily Evans since I was fifteen years old, and I probably always will. Loving is easy, Harry; there are always plenty of things we can find to love in people...." He paused and leaned forward, his forearms on his knees as he stared into the fire. "But *liking* someone, especially a person you love..."

He sighed and leaned back, his black eyes boring into his stepson's.

"*That* is sometimes the hardest thing of all...."

* * * * *

Harry evaded his mother during the rest of the week. He had put a good face on Christmas, avoiding looking his godfather and his mother in the eye, and especially avoiding being alone with either one of them. Neither of them tried to talk to him, and he was just as glad. The house felt strange and cold; Jamie thought he was behaving oddly, and told him so, but he said he was just nervous about the London trip. She didn't look convinced.

They had told their parents that they were meeting up with some friends for an outing in Diagon Alley on Saturday, and the adults thought nothing of it. Harry took a small pouch of Floo powder with him, and late Saturday morning, they both calmly walked into the kitchen fireplace at Hog's End and said distinctly, "The Leaky Cauldron!"

They each fell into the front room of the pub, coughing a little and brushing soot from their clothes; they'd had to wear robes, since they were supposedly going to be out in the wizarding, not Muggle world, but they were wearing proper Muggle clothes underneath and would be transfiguring their robes into warm coats to wear.

"Where've you been?" Draco drawled at them. He'd been sitting with his feet up on a table, drinking a pint of butterbeer. He grinned then, and got

to his feet just in time for Jamie to fling herself on him with all of the energy of a fourteen-year-old girl missing her boyfriend.

Jamie's transfiguration skills weren't as advanced as Harry's and Draco's, so Draco designed a flattering coat for her in a green to match her eyes, with a hood that framed her face charmingly. She glowed at him, throwing her arms around his neck again, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. Harry turned from them, impatient. Where were the others?

Harry and Jamie settled down to wait with Draco, ordering butterbeers of their own. Finally, they heard some commotion from the fireplace, and one at a time, Ron, Ginny and Charlie Weasley emerged, followed a few minutes later by Liam Quirke. Harry fought the urge to take charge, but Liam needed to think of Ron as their leader, so Harry simply gave Ron a subtle nod, and Ron clapped his hands together and said, "Right, then! Let's go to the Underground."

"Wait," Harry said, trying not to sound bossy. "I mean, does everyone have Muggle money?" From the looks on the others' faces, he knew they didn't. He had sent Draco to Gringotts the day before to convert some Galleons to pounds, and there was a quick exchange now between Draco and the others so that they were all equipped to enter the Muggle world. It's a bloody good thing Ron's *not* really running the show, he thought, else Liam would be trying to get onto the Tube with Galleons and Sickles....

He also had to remind the others to transfigure their robes before leaving the pub. He was starting to worry about how some of them would respond to other things in the Muggle world; he remembered the way Draco, Ron and Ginny had reacted to the lift in the department store when they'd purchased their funeral clothes...With a sigh, he stepped out into the London street with them, not sure he trusted even Charlie not to be conspicuous.

Fortunately, the trip to Richmond-upon-Thames was quiet and uneventful, and they didn't have to walk far to reach the church of St. Thomas the Apostle. Maggie met them at the door and sat with them; Bernard had not come with her. Hermione was playing the Schuman cello concerto with a local orchestra of mostly non-professional players; it was a concert to raise money for St. Thomas' new parish hall, and she was only doing it as a favor to her teacher, Edith. Edith's sister Lorraine was the organist and choir-mistress for the parish. Harry tensed, his stomach knotting up as he anticipated the confrontation between the witches and wizards who had grown up in the wizarding world, and the Muggle-borns.

The concert was being held in the dark, depressing Gothic sanctuary, which reminded Harry remarkably of St. Bede's. It was a grey winter day, and precious little light seeped in through the stained glass windows, which at any rate were mostly yellow and white, rather than the sparkling

jewel tones he'd seen elsewhere. Hogwarts castle had a good deal of similar architecture and stained glass, but the windows there were usually quite bright and colorful, depictions of witches and wizards from history, who spoke to the students if they were civil. (Harry had received help with homework more than once from a stained-glass depiction of a sixteenth-century wizard in a remote corner of the library.)

The orchestra was wedged into the space behind the communion rail and between the facing pews that normally held the choir. It was a tight squeeze. Hermione perched on the edge of a throne-like chair near the pulpit which, Harry assumed, was probably where the rector sat before ascending the steps to preach. The pews on which the audience sat were bare wood, no padding to make the concert a pleasanter experience. Hermione had entered to enthusiastic applause, wearing a very low-key (but also rather tight) black turtleneck and flowing silken trousers that allowed her to cradle her cello between her knees. Her hair was loose, cascading over her shoulders in wild waves. She seemed to have thoroughly embraced her hair's bushiness today. Somehow it made her seem quite formidable, like a male lion's mane. He saw that her ear piercings were almost all empty, although one could still make out the holes. For her, he realized, she was being very subdued. He wished Draco or Ron had seen her as she had appeared at the British Library; they would have been floored.

Ron, however, still seemed to be suitably impressed. When the applause was still going strong, he leaned across Charlie and whispered to Harry, "That's *her*?"

Harry nodded to him, and caught Charlie's eye; Ron's older brother was smirking, and Harry had to try very hard not to laugh. Ginny was sitting on Harry's right, and when he turned to her, he could see that Ron's reaction was not lost on her either; her eyes looked quite merry, as though she were storing up a great deal of teasing fodder. Harry was just happy they'd managed to sit next to each other; after the Hogsmeade play, this was almost like having a second date with Ginny. Almost. He wished he dared do a simple thing like hold her hand or put his arm across the top of the pew behind her, as Draco was doing with Jamie, on the far side of Ron.

Although her appearance was less extreme than when he'd seen her perform previously, her playing still served to floor them. (He wished Ron would close his mouth; he looked slightly dim-witted.) Harry could again see the slight stretching of her left hand while she played some of her solo passages, and wondered if she was doing this consciously now that it had been pointed out to her. The music was sweeping and romantic, and she looked lost in it, playing with her eyes closed much of the time, only sometimes glancing at the conductor. As each movement slipped by, Harry spent more of his time looking around for the Muggle-borns who said they'd come. He spotted Alicia Spinnet first, looking as dignified and

pristine as ever. Then he saw Dean Thomas, his eyes closed, nodding along with the music, looking like he was quite enjoying himself. Justin was harder to spot, but it turned out he was quite near to Alicia, looking as Harry remembered him. He wondered whether Liam had noticed Justin.

Finally, he saw Ruth, who met his eyes boldly, raising her eyebrows. He was taken aback. *I wonder whether she already suspects that she's a witch?* he wondered. Somehow, Ruth's expression seemed very *knowing*, and he turned away from her, feeling as though she'd been reading his very thoughts.

Suddenly it was as though the rafters of the old building had come crashing down. The concerto had ended, and the moment she lifted her bow from the strings, Hermione was engulfed in a roar of applause, people springing to their feet as they had at the British Library, but, it seemed to Harry that they were far less inhibited than those slightly-stuffy, dignified people (except for the young men who had asked her for autographs). Harry lost Ruth in the crowd once everyone was on their feet, and he looked to the front, seeing Hermione's blinding smile; in letters, she had groused about doing this favor, but he could tell she'd also enjoyed herself. He remembered her talking about playing with others, the dialogue of the instruments, and he knew that even though the soloist was on her own a lot in a concerto, she also played with the orchestra a great deal, and he had seen that she was most immersed in the music at these times.

In the invitation to the Muggle-borns, they were asked to come to the front to meet with Hermione after the concert, as her "special guests." It took some time for the applause to die out, but finally, the audience members gathered up their coats and hats and gloves and made their way out into the darkening winter afternoon. Harry nodded to Ron, and they started to make their way forward, working against a tide of orchestra members who had already packed and were coming at them now, wielding violin cases and violas and some frighteningly large double-basses. (Harry never understood what could lead a person to want to play such an awkward instrument; why not just try to haul a piano around?)

They finally found themselves in front of the communion rail, where Hermione was perched casually, chatting with Edith and Lorraine. Alicia, Dean, Ruth and Justin had come forward and were standing about a bit awkwardly. Then Dean noticed Ginny and said, "Hullo! You're Maggie Parrish, aren't you?"

Maggie came up behind him, saying, "Close. That's my little sister. Maggie Parrish," she said, extending her hand to him. He shook it.

"I say," Justin chimed in. "I was quite surprised to hear from you. I must warn you, though, I've no intention of divulging anything Wills and Harry have said to me..."

"Harry?" Ron said, bewildered. "You've talked to Harry?" He pointed at Harry now, to Justin's confusion.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're a brick, aren't you? He meant the younger son of the Prince of Wales. He's Prince Henry, really, but everyone calls him Harry." Harry thought frantically; wouldn't the younger prince have been conceived after the murder of James Potter? Oh well, he thought; even if it isn't precisely the same person, they had another boy and already had the idea of naming him Henry. That's not so unusual.

Ron bristled at Hermione, but didn't make a retort. He eyed her pointedly from head to toe. "Heard about you. So, you're the Muggle-born--"

"SO!" Harry said very loudly. He raised his eyebrows at Ron and tilted his head meaningfully at Hermione's teacher and her sister. Ron grimaced and now Harry waggled his eyebrows at Hermione, hoping she'd get the message. Her eyes widened and she leapt to her feet and cleared her throat.

"Edith and Lorraine, these are some friends of mine and some friends of theirs...." She reeled off Harry's and Ginny's and Maggie's names, and also got the Muggle-born names right, but Ron, Liam, Jamie and Draco had to introduce themselves. "We're going to hang about for a little bit, then maybe go find a pub or cafe. I'll see you back at the flat later." Harry thought this was a fairly tactful way of saying *I don't want you around right now, so sod off.*

The older women nodded and bade her goodbye, Lorraine thanking her effusively for doing the concert. When they had gone, Harry nodded to Draco, who went round the sanctuary, locking all of the doors with his wand. Harry nodded to Ron now, who faced the Muggle-borns, trying to get up the nerve to say what he had to say.

"You lot; we asked you to be here right now because--because there's something you need to know." Harry tried to keep a pleasant expression on his face, but his brain was screaming, *You don't know what you're doing! That was awful!*

Ruth frowned at him. "What is it?"

Ron took a deep breath and spit it out. "You're witches and wizards."

The four of them looked at each other, then at him, before bursting out into laughter. The others stared back and forth at each other, no one having expected this reaction. Finally, Hermione stepped in.

"Listen, quiet down! It's not funny. I just found out about a month ago that I'm a witch as well. There's--there's this magical community in Britain that stays pretty well hidden, and about ten years ago, they stopped

informing people like us--people who are magical even thought their parents aren't--that we're witches and wizards. The year each of us turned eleven, we *should* have received a letter from the magic school they go to...."

Dean scowled. "Magic school? D'you mean her, too?" He pointed at Maggie.

"Actually, I also just recently found out I'm a witch. But that's because I was kidnapped from my family--who are all witches and wizards--and raised in a Muggle family."

Alicia looked completely affronted by having to listen to such nonsense. "A *what* family?"

Hermione sighed. "Muggle. Wizards call non-magical people Muggles. Listen, haven't the four of you ever caused unexplained things to happen when you were upset or angry or really sad or happy?"

It was very quiet; the four of them looked at each other again, expressions of guilt quite clear on their faces. "Well," Justin began, "just yesterday--"

"D'you mean I can turn you into rabbits if I want?" Dean burst in.

Charlie decided to take charge. "Not exactly. You all need training to learn about proper ways to do things. Magic can be very dangerous if you don't know what you're doing."

Alicia had her arms crossed. "I have a telephone in my purse, and in one minute I am calling the police if you do not let me out of here," she declared. Harry remembered that she was from a rather wealthy family. Charlie turned to her, and Harry saw the same expression simultaneously blossom on each of their faces. *They're attracted to each other*, he thought. Maybe that will help....

"Listen," Charlie said softly, taking out his wand and a feather. "I'll teach you a simple spell. You can use my wand. If you weren't a witch, you wouldn't be able to do it. Then will you believe us?"

She softened a little but her eyes still looked a bit scared and doubtful. "Do something else first. Something impossible."

Charlie nodded and looked around, finally extracting a kneeler from under one of the pews. "Here. What animal would you like this transfigured into? Something about the same size, preferably."

Alicia smirked. "All right. How about--a beagle. With a red collar."

Charlie nodded and waved his wand--and a small, muscular beagle was standing where the kneeler had been, a red leather collar around his neck, his tongue lolling out and his large dark eyes shining.

Alicia screamed.

Harry jumped forward and put his hand over her mouth. "Don't do that!" he hissed. He removed his hand from her face slowly; her eyes were wild, staring back and forth between him and the dog.

"Go on," Charlie said, smiling at her. "Pet it."

She crouched and put her hand out cautiously. The dog seemed very pleased that someone was going to pet him, and he stepped toward her, lifting his eyes to hers and leaning into her hand. Harry watched her stroke the firm flank as the dog's tail waved about vigorously. When she stood again, she looked like an epiphany had come to her.

"So--I could do *that* with enough training?"

Charlie smiled at her. "Yes. And more."

They decided to team up to talk to the Muggle-borns, who were by now very excited. Ron, Hermione and Ginny spoke to Dean (Ron mostly seemed to want to talk to Hermione) while Maggie and Charlie spoke to Alicia, and Harry and Jamie were going to speak to Ruth. Harry suggested that Draco speak to Justin, and then said, very pointedly to Liam, "You come talk to Justin too. I thought you two might get on well. I suggested to Ron that he ask you to come because--well as I said, I thought you two might get on well--"

Justin frowned. "You don't even know me! What is this, some kind of blind date? I'm not gay!"

Liam looked at Harry, equally offended. "What, and I am? What have I ever done to make you think that, Potter?"

Harry looked back and forth between them helplessly. "I--I--I'm sorry. I didn't mean--" He trailed off, not having expected this little bump in the road. Well, he thought, I suppose they haven't come out yet, in this timeline, even to *themselves*.

"Do you want to talk to someone else?" he asked the two of them, exasperated. They looked around at the others already chatting animatedly, including Jamie and Ruth.

"No," they both said, not without a touch of resentment in their voices. Harry saw now that Draco also looked miffed.

"You don't think *I'm* gay, do you?" his best friend sniffed. Harry rolled his eyes.

"NO. Listen, why don't you talk to Ruth, and I'll take Justin, okay?" He sighed, making a mental note to always let people out themselves; they really, really didn't appreciate someone else doing it for them.

They were able to explain to the Muggle-borns about the thinking behind the ban, and the upcoming General Strike. They hoped that if the strike went well, the board could decide to take Muggle-born students as early as the next school year. They each levitated a feather using Charlie's wand, and said they didn't mind owls coming to deliver post to them. When all was said and done, Harry was pleased to see an excited light in each of their eyes, and he thought, *Maybe it will be one of them.* He glanced at Hermione, Maggie, Ruth, Justin, Alicia and Dean. *Maybe one of them will help me figure out how to fix the timeline....*

All they had to do now was convince the Board of Governors to lift the ban.

* * * * *

The first day of the term seemed to arrive very quickly. The fact that the meeting with the Muggle-borns went well served to make the rest of Harry's holiday far pleasanter than it had been when he'd seen his mother and godfather together. He thought ruefully of when he'd entered the butler's pantry on September first, hoping to find that Sirius was his stepfather. Now he wouldn't have traded Severus Snape for Sirius Black as a dad if he were offered a million gold Galleons. The irony was hardly comforting, though, in the face of his mother's infidelity. He pushed this thought down and tried to focus on the upcoming strike.

The plans had been going well. Charlie had helped them acquire enough tents to accommodate every teacher and student on the lawn of the castle. It would be a tight squeeze in some of them, but that wouldn't be a problem.

They had sent the letter with their demands to the Board of Governors, signed "Students of Hogwarts for the Repatriation of Muggle-Borns (SOHFTROMB). Only Ron's name was down as the leader of the group. He had received a reply within hours.

Dear Mr. Weasley,

As you are the son of a board member, we are certain you are familiar with the rationale behind the ban on Muggle-born students. While we appreciate your concern for their well-being, Muggle-born witches and wizards are much better

served by not being included in the wizarding community at this time. We are standing by this policy.

Yours sincerely,

*Magnus Cucurbita-Pepo
Chair
Hogwarts Board of Governors*

Ron stood in the kitchen of Hog's End, staring around; he'd just come from the Burrow by Floo. Harry was hoping that his parents were still sleeping peacefully, as the sun wasn't even up yet. He thought it possible that the kitchen was the oldest part of the house, originally built as the Great Hall where everything happened: cooking, eating, sleeping, socializing. Over time the house was expanded, but the kitchen retained unmistakable hints of age despite regular scrubbing by the house-elves. Harry remembered the small, cramped Weasley kitchen, and hoped that Mr. Weasley had at least been able to afford to expand it a bit, as he was working two jobs now.

"So; we have our answer," Harry said to him grimly, trying to bring his attention back to the matter at hand. Ron stopped staring around at the high-ceilinged room and looked at Harry.

"Yeah. So I guess we go into action."

"Right. Charlie's already got the tents hidden behind the greenhouses. He took care of food, too."

Ron groaned. "Food. That's right. Say, we couldn't do this after dinner in the Great Hall, could we?"

Harry looked at him sternly. "I'm going to be trying to get every last student out of that castle, and I don't want any of you coming on the train to set foot inside it until they agree to lift the ban. It might take a little while, but it'll be fine. You'd better go back; your mum'll be wanting you all to get ready to go to the station in a little while. And you don't want her noticing that your hand on the clock says *Traveling*."

Ron nodded and started to turn back to the fireplace, but he stopped and frowned at Harry. "How did you know about that clock?"

"Um, I heard Ginny telling Jamie about it," he lied, hoping Ron wouldn't ask her whether she really had told Jamie any such thing.

Ron nodded again, and with one last look around the kitchen of Hog's End, he threw some Floo powder into the fireplace, said loudly and clearly, "The Burrow!" and stepped into the green flames, disappearing from sight immediately.

His timing couldn't have been more perfect, as the kitchen door was opened a moment later by Simon, followed by Stuart, who was yawning hugely. Harry was fairly sure it was Stuart who had yawned; he was looking much healthier and more like his twin than he had for some time. It was now officially very, very difficult to tell them apart again.

"Wha'choo doing up so early, Harry?" Stuart said when his yawn had subsided. He collapsed in a heap on the couch, his dressing gown belt tied sloppily over his pajamas and his slippers fraying.

"And you're dressed already," Simon noted, making his way blindly to the table. When he had seated himself, he immediately pillowed his head on his arms, looking for all the world as though he were going to sleep again.

"I hope you're not *that* anxious to get back to school," Stuart said derisively from the couch. "You trying to make us look bad?"

Harry sat in the chair by the fire and looked at the two of them. "Yeah, well, I hope you're not all that anxious to get back to school, either."

Simon lifted his head from his arms and squinted at his older brother. "What?" he said in confusion.

Harry grinned at them. "How would you like to camp out in tents on the lawn of the castle instead? Not go to classes at all?"

The twins looked back and forth at each other, perplexed. "You're mental, Harry," Simon informed him.

"S'truth," Stuart said weakly.

"I'm not the one who's mental. One of the Gryffindors has organized a General Strike. Sent a letter to the Board of Governors. Unless the demands are met, there's to be no student or teacher setting foot in the school, and certainly no classes. No Quidditch, either."

"No Quidditch?" both boys said together, coming to life. Harry tried not to laugh.

"What are the ruddy demands?" Simon wanted to know.

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. Does it matter? We get an extended holiday. Because of course we wouldn't dream of not being in solidarity with the other students..." He winked at them, and they laughed in--they thought--understanding.

"Oh yeah, Slytherins are *really* known for having solidarity with the other houses," Stuart said sarcastically.

Simon chimed in, "They are when it means a holiday from homework!" He grinned, his black eyes sparkling in the firelight, and Harry looked at Stuart, reclining on the couch; he looked a little uncertain, but he was likely to do whatever his twin did.

"Okay! They need some help spreading the word, so when we get back to the castle, help me tell the students who stayed there. All right?"

They both shrugged and agreed. Harry hoped they wouldn't react badly when they found out what the demands were; after all, their mother was Muggle-born, even if they did seem to be very *very* Slytherin, through and through.

Jamie soon joined them, her hair askew and her eyes sleepy. Harry informed her that her dressing gown was inside-out and being tired and irritable, she threatened to hex him, but was forced to yawn just at that moment. Her brothers all laughed, and Harry thought it was a miracle that she didn't fall asleep again face-down in the porridge a house-elf fetched for her.

Harry turned a cold eye to his mother and Sirius when they came into the kitchen, leaving right afterward. He wondered whether he should say anything to Jamie about them, or about their parents sleeping separately in their quarters at Hogwarts. (It occurred to him briefly that his mother might actually be sleeping in Sirius' rooms, but he banished the thought. That was something he *really* didn't want to think about.)

His heart was beating a mile a minute when they climbed into one of the horseless carriages that were waiting in the drive before the house. Harry and Jamie and the twins were in one carriage, and their parents and Sirius were in the other. Harry wondered briefly how that could *not* be an awkward carriage ride.

The twins were quite excited on the way to the castle; Harry had told Jamie that they knew about the strike, but not the reason for it. She wondered about keeping this from them, but didn't push the issue.

Before they knew it, they were pulling up to the front steps of the castle. The four students behaved as though nothing were out of the ordinary, entering the castle and going down to Slytherin house to see their friends who had stayed at the castle during the holiday. Harry soon learned that telling Simon and Stuart about the strike was the best thing he could have done; the other Slytherins were *very* enthusiastic about it, even if it was organized by a Gryffindor, and Harry and Jamie consulted his map to track down all of the other students still in the castle. Not a single person said they weren't interested in participating, and most went off to their dorms to gather some belongings in preparation. Then Harry used the map to find Charlie; he was in the staff room, as were a number of other

teachers, including, Harry noted, the teacher he'd seen at the initiation. He wondered what that teacher would do.

The plan was to tell Harry's mother last, of all the teachers. He found his mother on the map; she was in her office. With Sirius. *Bugger!* Harry thought, watching Charlie's dot move closer and closer to the office. Just what I need, Charlie saying to me, *Do you think your mum and Professor Black are carrying on?* But to his relief, Sirius' dot moved out of the office before Charlie was anywhere near it. Harry sighed. The clock on the mantel in the Slytherin common room struck four. The Hogwarts Express would be pulling into the Hogsmeade Station.

It was the witching hour.

* * * *

Harry tried not to grin, looking around at the sea of tents on the castle lawn. Everything had gone according to plan; all of the students had stayed the night outside the castle, and almost all of the teachers, Charlie had informed him. Professor McGonagall was also with them, as Charlie suspected she might be. She had beamed at Ron Weasley, perhaps wishing she'd organized something of the sort herself back when the ban was first instituted. Harry didn't see his mother in the throng of teachers standing with the headmistress, but he caught his dad's eye for a second; he looked like he had numerous questions for Harry, but Harry looked away. He hoped his dad didn't suspect he was the real leader, rather than Ron.

The previous evening, sitting around campfires with students from other houses mixing freely, there had been a party atmosphere in the air, and Harry was pleased to see the way this had cut across house lines. Even Slytherins other than him and Jamie were socializing with students from other houses. When they met up, Charlie greeted Harry with a grin and a slap on the back. They didn't speak; there was no need. The flickering firelight amid the tents was one of the most beautiful things Harry had ever seen. He felt a strange power as he stood, surveying the scene before him. *I did this, he thought. Things will change.*

But not right away. They all lived on the lawn of the castle for a week, then ten days, and still no response from the board. Finally, when it had been two weeks, the word came down: the Board of Governors would all arrive at noon to discuss the situation with the leader of the rebellion. Ron was visibly nervous upon reading this missive (it had actually been sent to Professor McGonagall) but Harry assured him that he would do fine. They rehearsed what he would say when arguing the case of the Muggle-borns, and for the most part, he didn't make any mistakes. Now if only his voice would stop *shaking*, Harry thought, trying not to be irritable.

But a half-hour before the meeting, Harry and Draco were surprised at their campfire by the appearance of Lucius Malfoy. He gestured for them to join him in one of the nearby tents; they followed him, confused. Once inside the tent--which Harry had already noticed looked remarkably like Mrs. Figg's house--they all sat down around the kitchen table and Harry and Draco looked back and forth at each other, wondering what this was all about.

Lucius Malfoy looked around the tent contemptuously. "Hmph! Rat hole you're staying in. Not that I don't understand why; the last thing you need people doing is asking you why you didn't join in on this strike thing. We don't want anyone looking at your left arms, do we?"

They shook their heads; so, he thought they were being good little Death Eaters, pretending to go along so that no one would suspect that they served the Dark Lord. "What's the board going to do about all this, Dad?" Draco asked.

He sat back in his chair and looked at the two of them haughtily. "They are going to lift the ban."

Harry tried not to look thrilled; he tried for surprise instead. "What? Just like that?"

Now Lucius Malfoy looked as devious as ever. "Well--that's what we'll tell that Weasley boy. His sister's usually with him too, I've noticed; she must have instigated it. This has all the earmarks of a little girl getting all sentimental over the poor Muggle-borns..." His voice had gone sing-song as he mocked Ginny. Harry tried to control his temper, balling his hands into fists under the table, where Mr. Malfoy couldn't see.

"That's where you two come in. The Dark Lord doesn't like this General Strike; not one little bit. Even less the idea of Muggle-borns sulling the castle once more. So--you're finally going to find out what you can do for your Master."

Harry and Draco looked at each other; they'd forgotten that they hadn't done anything yet. Originally, they had expected to have to put painful curses on each other at the initiation, but Voldemort had been distracted by wanting to sacrifice his heir, and hadn't demanded anything of them at the time. Harry swallowed and tried to keep his face impassive. Draco was looking visibly nervous.

"What do we have to do, Dad?"

Lucius Malfoy's smile was very disturbing, Harry thought. "You each get to take on a Weasley. You'll take the girl, Draco. He'll take the brother," he said, nodding at Harry.

Draco frowned. "Take?"

"Wait," his father said, standing up and patting down his robes. "I have something for you. To help. So you can't be blamed. It'll all be *her*..."

Harry frowned now too. What was he--

"Here we are!" Mr. Malfoy said, pulling a black book out of his cloak. Harry widened his eyes in recognition; on the cover were the words *Diary of T.M. Riddle*. "Give this to the Weasley girl, after you're all back in the castle."

Draco took the book, staring at it. "Why? What will that do?"

That nasty smile again. "Never you mind. Just give it to her. The diary will do the rest."

Harry's heart was beating faster. If Ginny wrote in that diary, it would be just like his second year from his old life; Ginny would open the Chamber of Secrets and release the basilisk which surely lived there still, and once a few students--preferably Muggle-born--started to die, the ban would be instituted again, and then the trouble would mysteriously stop. But--Harry was not going to let that happen. For the first time, he was glad that Ginny had written in that diary in his old life, even thought she had nearly died and he'd had to battle a basilisk at the age of twelve. At least he knew what the diary could do, and that no one, under any circumstances, should write in it.

Draco nodded at his father nervously. "All right, Dad. I'll find a way to give it to her. She's friends with Jamie."

His father nodded. "Good. As for you, Harry," he said, and Harry somehow would have preferred for Mr. Malfoy to call him *Potter*; "you know your job."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Excuse me? I do?"

"Yes. I already said."

"Um--you did?"

Mr. Malfoy sighed in clear impatience with Harry's thickness. "Kill him," he said tersely. Then he stood and walked to the tent flap. He looked malevolently into Harry's eyes. "Or bad things may start to happen...." He turned to step through the flap, and was gone.

The two boys looked at each other; Harry thought Draco had never looked paler. The blond boy stared down at the diary, then looked up at Harry. "Guess I got off easy, huh? I just have to give this to Ginny...."

"No! You can't do that! That diary-- well, *no one* should write in that."

Draco frowned. "You know what this is?"

Harry nodded. "Trust me. That is a very dangerous book. Hide it somewhere and tell your dad you lost it or something. But don't write in it and don't let anyone else write in it."

"Why?"

Harry bit his lip. "Do you want a basilisk wandering around the school?"

"A *what*? How in bloody hell would *that* happen?"

"Trust me. Hide the diary. Do you promise?"

He looked as he had when he dove without question during the Quidditch match. "Of course." Harry nodded.

"Thanks." He rose to go, but Draco's hand on his arm stopped him.

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean--about Weasley. You're supposed to kill him."

"Oh, that. Well, I'm not going to, obviously."

Draco grimaced. "Well, it was nice knowing you..."

"What are you talking about?"

Draco sat up excitedly. "You think you're going to get away with that? Being told to kill Weasley and just not doing it? And then there's me; I have no idea what my dad's going to do when I tell him I've lost that diary, but--"

"So don't tell him that. Tell him you *did* give it to her. When nothing happens, it won't be your fault. He'll probably just assume she's terrible at keeping a diary, doesn't write in it very often."

Draco looked grimly at him. "He said to you, *Or bad things will start to happen*. You don't think he means that? Because I definitely do."

He bore his eyes into Draco's. "Hear this: I am *not* going to kill Ron Weasley. And if you do anything to harm one hair on Ginny's head, I *will* kill you. Are we perfectly clear on that?" He leaned over Draco's chair, his hands on the arms, his face not three inches from his best friend's. Draco

nodded slowly, looking as alarmed by Harry as he had been earlier by his own father. Harry straightened up and strode out of the tent.

* * * * *

Life was back to normal at the castle, for the most part. Most of the teachers didn't comment on the late start to the term. Word trickled down that after the Easter holiday, some older Muggle-born students would begin to attend special accelerated classes. They would be sorted into houses and eat with their fellow house members at meals, but they would not be eligible for Quidditch teams, and they would have their own rooms in the various houses.

Harry couldn't believe it! It had worked! And since Draco wasn't going to be giving Ginny the diary, there wouldn't be any huge disaster to make the board members change their minds!

Life seemed to be looking up in general; the weather even took a turn for the better; they experienced an odd January heat wave, snow melting almost completely from the grounds of the school. Harry was able to go running around the Quidditch pitch again in the mornings and shower in the changing rooms. His classes were going well and nothing bad had happened even though he hadn't so much as jinxed Ron Weasley. Ron was civil to him in class, which perplexed Seamus and Neville, especially when he reprimanded them for insulting Harry in Potions. Harry gave him a grateful smile, and hoped that he and Ginny would be able to tell him about their relationship soon.

Near the end of January, the warm weather was still holding, and Harry had arranged for Ginny to meet him down by Hagrid's old cabin after dinner, for a walk around the lake. The sky was devoid of stars, as a low, heavy cloudcover had been on the sky all day. Now that it was dark, it was starting to seem like winter would be back full-force.

Ginny threw her arms around his neck and kissed him when she arrived; after they did some more of that for a little while, Harry pulled back, smiling at her. "Let's walk," he said, tucking her hand in his arm. She followed him, putting her head on his shoulder. "Perhaps we can tell Ron about us soon? Like tomorrow?"

She looked up at him lovingly. "You know, I think we should. Yes! Definitely. Between the strike and Maggie--oh! I can't believe how everything has worked out!"

He laughed at her, unable to stop grinning, then wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her to the lake. They strolled in companionable silence for a while, then stopped to look up at the castle, at the lights glowing from the stained-glass windows. Harry sighed. "You know, I really love this place. There's just nothing quite like it anywhere, is there?" She

sighed and snuggled closer to him in response, and he kissed the top of her head. He looked down and saw some small pebbles and felt inspired. "Skipping stones! Once the lake freezes again, it won't be possible to do this for a while."

He stooped down and sorted through some pale, water-rounded pebbles, and Ginny did the same. "Oh!" she said excitedly. "Here's a good one, nice and flat." She stood and threw it across the water with a practiced gesture, and they counted in unison, "*One, two, three, four, five, six,*" as it bounced across the surface of the dark water.

It happened so fast, he never had time to think; before he knew what was occurring, a huge tentacle burst up through the water and flung itself around Ginny, water flying everywhere. Harry saw the shocked look on her face for only a split second before she was pulled under the surface of the lake.

Chapter Eleven

Down At The Quidditch Pitch

Harry looked in disbelief at the water, the ripples emanating out from where Ginny had been a moment ago. He knew he hadn't a moment to spare; his mind worked quickly. He knew exactly what he needed. He pictured the items he wanted very clearly, and especially their locations; then he raised his wand and shouted, "Accio!"

While he waited, hours seemed to pass, although he knew realistically that it was probably less than a minute; he counted to himself under his breath, and he hadn't reached "fifty" when he saw the item that would have been nearer hurtling toward him from the castle. Luckily, it was flying with the handle facing him; he put up his hand and deftly snatched the carving knife out of the air. He had pictured it very clearly in its rack in the kitchens; he hadn't taken much notice of the equipment the house-elves used when he'd passed through there on his way to the root cellars for the Dark Arts lesson on boggarts, but somehow he'd managed to remember the carving knives near the great stone sinks....

He hefted the knife in his hand, wishing it had some sort of thong on it so he could wrap it around his wrist. He looked up at the castle; the other item wasn't coming yet. He hoped no one had moved it....

Bending down, he took off his shoes, took out one of his shoelaces and put it through a hole at the bottom of the knife handle, and tied the shoelace around his wrist. Using the lace for the other shoe, he tied both shoes to his belt. He stuffed his socks in his pockets. Standing barefoot on the banks of the lake, he started to shiver, wondering whether the other necessary thing would ever arrive.

Finally, he saw it, and put up his hand to grab it from the air. It squished into his palm and he almost put it in his mouth before he remembered to raise his wand and say, "Lumos!" He wouldn't be able utter incantations after eating the Gillyweed. Then he remembered to keep out about one-third of it, and he shoved this into the pocket without the socks before putting the rest into his mouth.

It was as repulsive and slimy as he remembered, but he was grateful that he knew his mother had a supply of it in her office. As he chewed, he wondered whether she was there now, whether she would be curious about the Gillyweed flying out of its jar and down the corridors of the dungeons. He hoped she was; he no longer cared whether she and Sirius were together, what he desperately wanted was an adult to come help him, to know what was happening. As he chewed, he grew colder; the unseasonable warmth was long gone, the temperature had to have dropped forty degrees, and the heavy clouds that had been hovering low in the sky all day opened, dropping snow thickly on the castle, the grounds, the lake, and on Harry. It was coming down very fast, the wind was blowing faster still, and still he was chewing.

When he finally swallowed the Gillyweed, it was with a great effort, and still nothing had happened. Finally he felt it; the sensation of his lungs being squashed, of not being able to breathe, and he knew that if he felt the sides of his neck, he would find gills there; he glanced down and saw the webbing between his toes. Grasping his lit wand in his right hand and the carving knife in his left, he dove into the dark lake.

Under the water, it felt warmer, but he couldn't see very well as his wandlight didn't reach very far. The last time he'd been in the lake, there had been some daylight above to help light his way, until he'd gone so deep that the sunlight couldn't penetrate. This time he had nothing but the feeble wandlight, and no guarantee that Ginny would be all right, that Dumbledore wasn't going to let anything happen to her. And it was a huge lake; she could be anywhere. He'd had to wait several minutes before he was able to dive in....

He kept swimming forward, looking for any sign of movement. But all he saw was the underwater vegetation swaying gently, waving at him benignly. Then, something familiar; he wasn't sure how long he'd been swimming when he felt the Grindylows grab his ankles. Harry wasn't going to stand for this; he slashed at them with the knife, missing them, but they fell back, and he continued to swim forward, the weed growing from the lake bottom turning blacker and slimier, long tendrils curling up toward the surface.

At length, he came to the mervillage he remembered, and saw that in the middle of the open space that seemed like a town square, the creature that had taken Ginny had captured some mermaids and mermen as well. The entire population of merpeople seemed to be trying to fight it with

tridents, sharpened sticks, and other weapons, but they dared not get too close. The creature looked like it might get away with its attack. Ginny's head was flopping on her neck in an alarming way.

He didn't know what the thing was; perhaps someone had recently put a very small version of it or an egg into the lake, and it had quickly grown into this monster. It was something like a cross between a kelpie, a squid and a basilisk, he thought, but it had long, strong tentacles that a kelpie never had, which grasped Ginny and three mermaids and two mermen. All six of its extremities thus busy, Harry knew it had nothing left to fight him but its mouth.

But what a mouth! The fangs were what reminded him of the basilisk, and he avoided them, fearing venom. He took a page from Fawkes' book and aimed for its eyes with the carving knife, while some mermen tried to distract it with their tridents. It worked, and when he was successful with one of the eyes, it started howling, the sound echoing eerily in the underwater environment. The mermen had seen what he'd done, and now they attacked the other eye, and the howling increased in pitch and volume, but the tentacles were curled around its victims as firmly as ever.

Harry kicked down through the water and hacked away at the nearest tentacle, not even bothering to see whether it was the one holding Ginny. A thin, silvery blood began to leak from the wound. Harry avoided the shining globules escaping from its body, as though it had mercury for blood. The monster started to collapse; Harry saw it release a young mermaid with greenish skin, her seaweed-like hair pulled into plaits like a human child's. A merman snatched her out of harm's way, nodding at Harry with appreciation, and Harry wondered whether he was her father.

Now that the creature was blinded and disoriented, the merpeople were attacking its tentacles one by one, freeing their people. Harry worked with an older plump mermaid to wound the tentacle holding Ginny, and finally, it relaxed its grip on her. Harry withdrew the rest of the Gillyweed from his pocket and forced it between her lips, moving her jaw for her, stroking her throat so she would swallow. He could feel her pulse still, in her throat, and took some hope from that. At length, he saw the gills sprout on her neck, and finally, she opened her eyes in amazement, but whether she was most amazed to be alive, to see Harry, or to be breathing underwater, he had no way of asking her. She threw her arms around him, and he held her tightly. They started to swim away, Ginny holding onto his right arm, which still held his lit wand, but the merpeople stopped them.

They gestured to the vanquished creature; Harry turned to see it lying in a heap on the floor of the lake, gashes on all of its tentacles, its eyes a destroyed mess. Harry turned back to the merman who seemed to be in charge. The merman bowed deeply to him, and Harry returned this sign of respect. A mermaid swam up with something in a string bag that seemed

to be made of green waterweed and the ruler of the merpeople handed this to him. It was slightly heavy to Harry, and he bowed his thanks. He would have to wait until he was back on land to find out what the gift was.

He had dreaded passing the Grindylows again on the way back, but he needn't have worried; the merpeople gave them an honor guard. They waved goodbye to Harry and Ginny, who stood on the lake bottom, their heads just below the surface while they waited for the Gillyweed to wear off so they could breathe air again.

It happened for Ginny first; he must have given her much less than he'd thought, or the trip back had taken less time (he guessed it was the latter). She started to gasp, but Harry pushed her up out of the water onto the bank, throwing up the bag with the gift from the merpeople.

At last, he began to feel lightheaded, so he put his face above the water to try breathing some air. He was able to do so, but what he saw in the world above the lake shocked and dismayed him.

Not only was the warm weather really thoroughly gone by now, in its place was a blizzard of epic proportions. *How long were we underwater?* he wondered. When he'd pushed Ginny out of the lake, it was onto a bank covered in snow, and she lay there, soaking wet, quickly being covered in snow herself, her lips turning blue. He hauled himself out of the lake, amazed that he could even see Ginny. The snow was so thick and whirling that he couldn't see the castle, and he wasn't even completely certain that they were where they'd been when Ginny had been pulled into the lake by the creature.

He was shivering uncontrollably, standing barefoot in the whirling snow, and trying to keep the carving knife hanging from his wrist from cutting his leg. He took the knife off and threw it in the lake, then picked Ginny up in his arms and started staggering toward what he thought might be the castle. The whirling snow buffeted them, the winds filled his ears, and he found himself having to squint to avoid snow actually scouring his eyes, in spite of his glasses (which kept fogging up). He had no idea how long he'd been doing this, or whether he was going in circles, when his shoulder hit something very hard. He put Ginny down momentarily and felt it with both hands; it was a building of some sort, stone. Perhaps they had made it back to the castle! He picked her up again and, leaning against the wall, backing himself around the structure, he began searching for a door.

He finally banged into the doorknob, but when he tried to turn it, his hand couldn't get a grip. He pulled out his wand, crying "*Alohomora!*" with a hoarse, shaking voice. The door opened a crack, but it was enough. He put his shoulder to it and pushed it open wider, then picked up Ginny and carried her inside. He put her down on the floor so he could return to the door to close it. It wasn't easy; in the minute he had needed to carry her

inside, enough snow had built up in the doorway that it was blocking the door from closing completely. He angrily kicked the snow out of the way and then slammed the door. He didn't bother with his wand because he was alarmed by the anemic response the door had given to his Unlocking Charm; when he'd discovered his mother and Sirius and had merely *thought* about that charm, and wasn't even using his wand, the door had been flung against the wall and cracked down the middle.

He looked down at himself, and at Ginny. They had both gone from being immersed in the lake to walking in a blizzard. As far as he knew, it wasn't advisable to wear soaking-wet clothes to do this. *It isn't advisable to become a Death Eater, either,* he thought ruefully. He knew that that creature being in the lake had to have something to do with Voldemort. Well, whatever it was, it was dead now.

The important thing was to make sure Ginny was going to be all right. She lay on the floor in a puddle, her wet hair splayed around her head, her skin frighteningly pale. He looked around, feeling a little less disoriented, and realized that they had entered the Quidditch changing rooms. They were in the anteroom now, which led to separate spaces for male and female players to change and shower, and further down the corridor, separate common areas for two teams to have pre-game discussions or strategizing sessions.

They were stuck, he realized. We should have gone the other way; if we'd reached Hagrid's old cabin, we could have gone up to the castle using the school Floo network....Damn! But then he thought of the showers, and hot water...that would help. That would help immensely.

"Ginny! Ginny wake up! You have to go to the girls' showers; get out of those wet things and get under some hot water. Ginny! Ginny!" He crouched next to her and tapped her cheeks lightly with his fingers, then he actually gave her a light slap to try to bring her round. Her head lolled back and forth, her lips still blue. Her eyelids fluttered slightly.

"Harry?" she said weakly. "Where--? So cold, so cold--"

His heart was in his throat. "I know, Ginny. But we're in the Quidditch changing rooms, see? We'll be all right; there are warm, dry towels and hot showers. But you have to get up; you have to go take a shower. You have ice in your clothes. Ginny, don't go away again!"

Her eyes closed once more and her head fell back to the floor. He slapped her face some more, not at all gently, but it did no good. His teeth clacking uncontrollably, he carried her instead into the boys' showers. After putting her down carefully on the white tile floor, he found some towels and stepped behind a partition to take off his wet things, shaking uncontrollably the entire time, although he felt that it was a huge improvement just to be out of the sodden ice-laced clothes. He wrapped

the towel around his waist and returned to Ginny. He had no prurient thoughts about this, no illusions that this was for any other purpose than to save her life. Working quickly and methodically to remove her clothes, he wrapped a large towel around her when he was done and tried to get her to return to alertness again.

"Ginny! You're out of your wet clothes now. You need to get under some hot water. Can you walk to the girls' showers? Please Ginny, say something--"

She opened her eyes a little and he didn't want to show how alarmed he was by the vacant expression he saw there.

"Harry," she said feebly, trying to lift her arm and only succeeding for a split second. "You need to help me."

He swallowed. "Ginny, I don't think--"

"*Please.*" She seemed to use her last ounce of strength to say this, her eyes closing again. I can do this, he thought, I can do this without thinking about, er, things I shouldn't think about....

He went to the furthest shower head and turned on the hot water full blast. Except that nothing came out of the shower head, neither hot nor cold water. He tried the next one, and the next. None of the shower heads worked. He decided that the pipes must be frozen, and he started to pound on the tile wall with his fist, repeating, "Bugger, bugger, bugger, bugger...."

"Language, Potter," he heard a soft amused voice from the corner; Ginny's eyes were open again. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

He tried not to panic her. "I guess the pipes are frozen. There's no water right now."

"Oh." She sounded so forlorn! he thought. He met her gaze, worried about her dreadful skin tone and blue lips. "Your lips are blue," she informed him softly. He forced himself to smile.

"Yours, too."

"What about--" she trailed off.

"What?"

"The team rooms. There are couches in there. If we can't get hot water, we can at least be off the floor."

He nodded and started to help her stand. "Can you make it?"

She nodded and took a step, but her legs buckled under her, and he didn't wait for her to hit the floor painfully; he scooped her up in his arms and started staggering with her to one of the team rooms. He felt so weak he was afraid he would faint and take her down with him.

Hanging around the perimeter of the room were the banners for the four houses. He took her to a battered old leather couch under the Gryffindor banner and help her to lie down. "Are there more towels?" she asked, and he nodded, staggering back to the showers to get some. Unfortunately, there were only two left in the boys' showers. Searching the girls' showers only brought three more, but it was better than nothing. He also brought his wand.

"I have some towels," he whispered to her; he seemed to have no strength left to speak in a normal voice. "I'm going to heat them with my wand."

He draped two towels on top of her and aimed his wand at them, shivering, since he was only wearing a towel from his waist to his knees. "Calefacero," he croaked. Ginny looked back at him listlessly, then shrugged, still in her prone position. He touched the towels; they felt as cold as ever. He pointed his wand at the pile of towels on the floor. In a fit of frustration, he said, "Incendio!"

"No, Harry! Don't set them on fire! We need them!" It was the most energetic Harry had seen her since they'd been out of the lake. But then they both really looked at the towels which should have gone up in flames; a small wisp of smoke emanated from the pile, then floated whitely up to the ceiling and evaporated. Harry stared at his wand.

"I--I guess I have no focus right now. Nothing's working..." He swallowed; he felt helpless and alone, even with Ginny here. He looked down at his thin torso, not really much changed from September; his skin looked ghastly, and when he looked at his toes (he had been walking in the blizzard in his bare feet), he saw that they looked even worse. Ginny looked at him with concern.

"Harry," she said slowly, "take the banners down."

"What?" Why didn't she want the banners to be up anymore?

"We need as much coverage as possible. They're cloth."

He understood now, and ran around the room, yanking them down from the walls, including the Gryffindor banner above the couch where Ginny was. They were all woven of quite heavy woolen thread and would make excellent blankets. He spread one of them over one of the other couches, then ran to the other team room and came back with the banners that had been hanging there, as well.

"I'll take these, you take those and the towels..."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "It would be much more practical if we shared all of the coverings, rather than dividing them up. Especially since we don't know how long this storm is going to last." Their eyes went to the clerestory windows above where the Gryffindor banner had hung; nothing was visible except whirling white snow.

He swallowed and nodded; he picked her up and carried her to the other couch, with the banner on it, and then turned to get the other towels. When he turned back to her, she had removed the towel that had been wrapped around her, which she had draped over herself like a blanket instead. He tried not to think about this as he placed more towels on top of her, and then piled the seven remaining house banners on top. Finally, he looked at her; her eyes seemed to be very bright, and her hair was drying. Her skin and lips still looked slightly bluish, but she smiled at him.

"Take off the towel, Harry."

He nodded again, removing it quickly and climbing under the pile of towels and banners with her, feeling her clammy skin against his. She was probably right; it would be best to share the coverings and try to send their body heat into each other. But, he thought with a barely suppressed groan, in another way, this was going to be pure torture....

After some awkward maneuvering, they found a comfortable position; Harry lay prone, and Ginny, wedged between him and the back of the couch, lay on him half-way, one arm and one leg thrown across him. Her limbs still felt quite cold to him, but where her chest was pressed against his, there was a definite warmth. He wrapped his arms around her back, putting his cheek against her hair. Pulling the towels and banners up over them more securely, he began to feel some blood moving in his own body again (although he was worried about his toes).

I can do this, he thought. I can just hold her and we'll keep each other warm and wait out the storm and that's all that will happen.

But that was before he felt her lips on his neck and her hand stroking his arm, moving in lazy circles. And her knee...her knee was awfully close to....

"Um, Ginny?" he whispered to her.

"Mmm?" she muttered lazily, still moving her hand and mouth.

"Why--why don't we try to get some sleep?"

She stopped now and looked up at him. Her freckles stood out very clearly on the bridge of her nose, making her look very young. He tried to focus on that, instead of looking down at her body....

"All right," she said softly, obligingly, as though she hadn't been doing anything that implied they might do something else. She kissed him lightly, then put her head down again, this time snuggling into his chest in a manner that was more suggestive of preparing to sleep.

In a little while he heard her slow, regular breathing, and when he looked down at her pale eyelashes on her paler cheeks, they were fluttering slightly; she had moved swiftly into a dream state. She must have been very tired, he thought. Her nose whistled and he resisted the urge to laugh; it would probably wake her. Instead, he watched her sleep for a while, rather getting to like the whistle from her nose, until the feeling of her breath moving the light, downy hairs on his chest began to make him think the very thoughts he'd been trying to avoid in the boys' showers. *Get control of yourself, Potter, he thought. This isn't the time.* He only hoped she wouldn't notice the rather obvious physical manifestation of his thoughts....*Good thing she seems to be a sound sleeper.*

He closed his eyes at last and tried to drift off, but his dreams were not restful ones. He saw the heir's body again, but this time he was looking right at Harry, even with the gaping hole in his chest, asking how he could have let this happen....He was in the lake again, fighting the kelpie-squid-basilisk, but every time he cut through a tentacle, three sprouted in its place....Then he was in the infirmary, pulling the curtain from around a bed where a body lay, the sheet pulled up over the head. He cautiously reached out and pulled the sheet back, over and over again, each time seeing a different person: the heir, his twin brothers, his sister, his mother, his stepfather, once he even saw Hagrid.

And then he saw Ginny.

He awoke with a start, his heart thumping crazily, his breath catching in his chest. He looked down at the top of her head, amazed to see her, convinced that the dream was real and this was the dream. He caressed her back; the skin was smooth and dry now, instead of clammy, which encouraged him. Perhaps everything would be all right. Of course, they still had to find out who had put that thing in the lake, but they weren't going to freeze to death. They'd probably be a bit hungry, but even though the pipes were frozen, they could always drink melted snow, so they wouldn't dehydrate. In the morning, we can go back to the castle. I'll talk to my dad and Dumbledore about the creature in the lake; they'll understand....

He was getting distracted again; Ginny had moved in her sleep, brushing her left hand over his nipple in a way that was stimulating him

unbearably. He sucked in breath between his teeth; oh Ginny, you're killing me....

And then he opened his eyes and looked straight into hers; she had also woken up and was gazing at him with an unmistakable expression on her face that made it difficult for him to remember to breathe. He had no idea how long they'd slept. She put her left arm on his other side and raised herself over him, brought her face closer so that it was hovering not an inch from his. He moved his eyes down for a split second; her body was above his now, rather than being pressed against it, and he could see her quite clearly. He moved his eyes up to hers again, unable or unwilling, he didn't know which, to resist any longer. Framing her face with his hands, he pulled her mouth down to his, feeling her cold lips begin to warm, opening his mouth and hearing her inarticulate whimper of delight.

They kissed languidly while Harry caressed her back lightly, feeling her shiver under his touch; he moved his hands down to her waist, amazed by how thin she was. Had she been eating properly? He felt like he could count her ribs if he tried....

But then that thought subsided as she gently ended the kiss and softly moved her lips down his jaw to his throat. He brushed his fingers down her thighs under the towels and banners; her flesh there still felt cold, but it was at least dry. He traced the outside of her legs with his fingers while she moved her lips down his chest; he felt a tide rising in him that he fought against, but then she moved her body further down, and further--

"Aaah!" he cried out when she had reached him; she looked up at him, keeping eye contact with him the whole time while she thoroughly engulfed him. After that he had to squeeze his eyes shut. "Ginny," he whispered, "are you sure about this--?" His breathing was raspy; he could barely get the question out. In answer, she lowered her hips even more firmly, making him gasp. He opened his eyes, feeling sweat break out on his brow, and saw that above the well-known dark eyes burning with passion, beads of sweat had formed on her brow as well. She didn't speak, looking very serious now as she moved, every raising and lowering bringing Harry to a new level of sensation; it didn't hurt that he was able to see her very clearly this way, which was rather stimulating in and of itself....

He pulled her mouth down to his, then released her lips and nipped at her neck, making her moan, even as she continued to move. He helped her now, holding her hips, feeling her sharp bones so distinctly under his hands. It wasn't long before he was convulsing beneath her, his mouth against her neck muffling his cry.

When the zenith had passed, he released her neck and she collapsed on him. Her warmth still surrounded him, and he stroked her back slowly. But when she lifted her eyes to him...the disappointment he saw there made

him feel that someone had reached into his chest and wrenched his heart out of its place. He caught his breath. "Ginny," he said softly. "Did you--"

"I'm fine," she said quickly, the quaver in her voice giving evidence to the contrary.

"Because I can, um, do some things to--"

"*I'm fine*," she said again, more firmly, and now Harry heard tears in her voice. He cupped her cheek in his hand. He felt like crying himself, when only a minute earlier he had been flying far above Hogwarts castle...

"I've heard--I've heard it's not usually, um, you know, the first time--"

"Don't worry about me. Are you all right?"

"*All right?* I'm--Ginny you were--I'm speechless--"

She shifted a little so that their bodies were no longer connected and moved into her previous position, one arm and one leg thrown over him. Harry couldn't get over how sad she looked. It wasn't supposed to be like this! he thought. He wished he hadn't let her do that; he couldn't bear the way she looked now. He should have had more control....

"Anyway," she said, trying to sound light, "it's like you said. First time. I've always heard the first time is supposed to be a sort of, um, practice run..."

His voice caught. "Well, yes, to a certain extent. But I--I--" He traced her face with his fingers. "I love you so much, Ginny, and I just wanted--I mean, I want--"

She smiled at him. "And I love you, Harry," she said, as thought it were ridiculous that this even needed to be said. "I'm fine, honestly. That was very--nice--"

He didn't like the shadow he still saw behind her eyes. "But Ginny, it's supposed to be more than *nice*--"

"Harry, *stop it*. I--I just thought--well, I've heard of people who are snowbound staying warm this way, and I thought--"

His heart dropped into his stomach. "Oh."

She saw the expression on his face and immediately looked remorseful. "Harry! I didn't mean--oh, that just came out all wrong..."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Well, *I* definitely feel warmer..." He sighed; nothing ever seemed to go as he wanted it to in this world. She wrapped

her arms around him and pillowed her head on his chest again; she was still lying on top of him, and he couldn't tell whether the sweat between them had come from his body or hers, but surely it was a good sign if either of them was sweating?

The storm still raged outside; they could hear the snow scouring the windows, and Harry shivered again from the thought of what it must be like out there.

"We should probably just get some more sleep right now, Harry. That storm isn't letting up any time soon."

He smoothed her hair down her back affectionately. "Yes. You're right, of course."

She laughed into his chest and then gave the skin there a smacking kiss. "There!" You already know how to be the perfect boyfriend. Just keep repeating that as much as possible when we're together and you'll be fine..."

Now he was the one laughing. "Oh, I see. I'm to be hen-pecked, is it?"

She laughed again, softer now, and moved her lips lightly over his skin in a way that sent an electric current down to his very toes. "Ginny-pecked. It's much nicer, I think. Hens are nasty creatures." He held her more tightly, laughing once more; they lay still and quiet for some time, and after a while he was remotely aware of her nose whistling again, which made him smile, as the wind whistled outdoors, accompanying her, and he let himself stop worrying for once and accepted the gift of sleep when it came.

* * * * *

Harry's eyes flew open in alarm. "Ginny!" he said urgently, shaking her shoulders to wake her.

"Wha--?" she started to say groggily, but he wouldn't let her speak.

"Ginny, have you been to see Madam Pomfrey? For Prophylaxis Potion?"

"Have I--is *that* why you're waking me up?"

"I just had this dream--and I just realized--oh, Ginny we *really* shouldn't have done that..."

She yawned hugely and put her head back down on his chest. "Don't worry, Harry. As soon as we get back I'll go to Madam Pomfrey. Ta--"

"Ginny, don't do that! I want you to *swear* you'll go see her--"

She lifted her head again, starting to look very annoyed indeed. "Harry, I'm *tired*..."

"*Swear it.*"

She rolled her eyes and put her head down. "I *swear* it. Now can I sleep?"

He leaned back and closed his eyes again, hoping the dream wouldn't return. "Yes, now you can--"

"What's that noise?" she said abruptly, lifting her head again. She cocked her head to one side, with a look of intent listening on her face. Now Harry heard it too, and he closed his eyes, trying to think what it might be....

"*The showers,*" he said. "When I turned on the showers to check for hot water, I must have left them on. The pipes aren't frozen anymore!"

She looked up at the clerestory windows. "Not only have the pipes warmed up, the storm is over and it's almost morning," she said, nodding at the windows; they could see a pale pink sky through the middle of the window, and the early light was making the rainbow of stained glass around the border glow like jewels.

He looked down at her; they'd never woken up together before. "Good morning, love," he murmured, lifting her chin with his finger. He'd only meant to give her a peck, but she opened her mouth, and he melted, softening into the kiss, feeling a warmth spreading down to his--

"Ginny!" he cried. He leapt out from under the layers of towels and banners; her hand had been surprisingly cold. Her eyes followed him appreciatively.

"Well," she said, "now that we've had our 'practice run,' perhaps we can--"

"No, Ginny! We--we can't. Not until you've seen Pomfrey. We can't--"

"Do you always look like that in the morning?" Her sly look was frankly lascivious; Harry glanced down, then reddened.

"That's--that's quite normal." He looked at her face again. "Stop that! Just hand me a bloody towel so I can turn off the showers before all the hot water is gone!"

Giggling, she handed him a towel, and he wrapped it around his waist, striding down the corridor to the boys' showers. He slipped in between the sprays of water, turning off each one he'd left on, then returning to the doorway of the showers so he could call to Ginny.

"I'm going to take a shower. Why don't you do the same?" He didn't hear a response; he went to the far shower and turned the water on again; he almost didn't want to add any cold to the hot, to temper it, but he decided that being scalded on top of almost freezing wasn't the best idea.

The water was pounding in his ears, so he was surprised when he turned and saw her under a spray of water at the far end, standing and letting the warm water flow over her...

He turned away, having trouble getting his breath once he had seen her like that. He grabbed some soap, putting his back to her so she wouldn't be able to make fun of him again. "You were supposed to use the girls' showers!" he said shakily, above the noise of the water.

"We don't know that the pipes over there are all right."

"You didn't even *try*," he said, a little irritably. She laughed and he glanced at her over his shoulder; she had tipped her head back and had her eyes closed as the water cascaded down her body....

He turned away from her again; this was not a good idea, he thought. No at all. He would have liked to spend more time under the warm spray, but he didn't want to stand showering in plain sight of Ginny any longer than absolutely necessary. He turned it off and wrapped the towel around himself, then left, averting his eyes from her as he passed. He had to be strong; he hadn't been earlier, when she'd maneuvered herself so that their bodies had joined....He hadn't the heart to push her away. He wanted this as much as her, and on top of that, he'd been celibate (despite Draco's and Mariah's best efforts) for all of this life, and for the last couple of months he spent in his other life. He was a normal, red-blooded teenage boy, and no one could possibly blame him for--

It was wrong, said an insistent voice in his head. *Oh, fine; where were you earlier?* He felt grouchy. Fine time for the old conscience to rear its head; it's all very well and good wagging fingers after the fact....

You were rationalizing.

I know, I know; but then, so was Ginny, talking about hearing about snowbound people keeping warm this way....

He shook his head to clear it, then dried himself off. He took out his wand and tried the warming charm he'd failed to execute the previous evening. This time it worked. He was *definitely* feeling more like his old self. He dressed in the warmed clothes, sighing as he drew the robes around his shoulders, then settling back on the couch, he spied Ginny's clothes, and performed the charm on those as well. He started to sit down to wait for her return, but then he realized that the last thing he needed was to see her without clothes again, and he crossed the corridor to the other team

room, taking one of each of the house banners with him. He could always say he was hanging them up again as an excuse for why he wasn't in this room.

He closed the door to the other team room and tried to remember which wall had displayed which banner; he walked round the room, laying them on the couches, then started using his wand to make them fly up onto the wall again and reattach themselves to the long rods over which they'd been draped. When he was just about to re-hang the Gryffindor banner, he felt a wave of cold sweep through the room and he glanced up at the clerestory windows, wondering whether one was open slightly. The windows looked secure; the draft seemed to come from the direction of the door. Harry turned to see whether Ginny had opened it, but instead he saw that a ghost had entered the room *through* the door. Harry's jaw dropped and he staggered backward, falling onto the couch with the Gryffindor banner still draped over it.

"Harry? What are you doing?"

He opened his mouth and tried to talk, but nothing came out. He just stared and stared. *It can't be. It isn't...* his brain kept insisting. *It's another trick of Voldemort's.*

He drifted close to Harry, bringing more of the cold with him. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Finally, Harry found the power of speech. "Well--well you could say I look like I've seen a ghost," he said softly.

James Potter's ghost threw back his grey transparent head and laughed heartily. "Oh, that's wonderful, Harry. Good one, that...."

"You--you--you're a ghost!"

He looked down at his insubstantial image and back up at Harry. "Well as I'm dead, how else would you be able to talk to me?"

"It's just that--well, do you know about--"

"About you changing time? Yes, Harry."

"But--but you weren't a ghost in my other life, were you? If you were, I never ran into you here at the changing rooms. In fact, I'm surprised I haven't run into you down here before now. I was down here every morning until the weather turned cold."

"I know, Harry. I was avoiding you. I was afraid--well, I was afraid you wouldn't want to listen to what I had to say, and you'd think it was only self-interest...."

"What you had to say?"

"When I said, 'What are you doing?' I meant 'What are you doing getting even more firmly attached to this life instead of getting your arse out of it?'"

Harry bristled. "Now, see here, there's no call--"

"To use language? I beg to differ. It's gone on long enough, Harry."

"Don't you think I think that every day that I wake up and I'm in this life?"

"I somehow doubt that you thought it this morning..."

Harry grimaced. "We--we could have frozen to death, we were really cold, and the showers didn't work--"

His father frowned at him and raised his eyebrows. "I may be dead, Harry, but I'm not stupid. And the showers didn't work because I messed around with them. I was hoping you'd try to get to the castle if there weren't adequate creature comforts here. But at the same time, I didn't dare come near you; I didn't want to make you any colder than you already were. That's why I've waited until you were fully clothed again. I kept taking little peeks, and I finally found you dressed again."

Harry leapt to his feet. "Spying on us! Is that what you were doing?"

The ghost waved his hand. "Oh, don't worry. I didn't see the two of you doing anything...."

"Bloody hell," Harry muttered, pacing and running his hand through his hair. "Did you do that in my old life, too? Or was it both you *and* mum there?"

His father looked at him placidly. "Oh, I wasn't a ghost in your old life, Harry. Neither was your mother."

Harry stopped and sat down heavily on the couch, worrying the cloth of the Gryffindor banner between his fingers. "You weren't? Why?"

His father gave him a lopsided smile. "Happy people don't become ghosts, Harry. You know that. You've met Myrtle, and Nick."

Harry nodded. "That's true. They both had unfinished business..."

James Potter's ghost smiled. "Your mother and I didn't, not when we died on the same night....I went first. I tried defending myself against Voldemort, but I couldn't. I didn't leave right away; I saw him kill your mother, and then together, we watched him try to kill you. We thought

that at least, if he did kill you, we'd be together always as a family....But then the strangest thing happened, and I've never understood why...."

"It was Mum," Harry said softly. "Her love. The way she told him to kill her instead of me....Her sacrifice put a kind of protective charm on me. Dumbledore called it the oldest, deepest magic. That's why the curse rebounded off me and hit him. If he hadn't done whatever strange things he did to make himself nearly immortal, it would have killed him...."

His father nodded. "We saw him leave, and we knew that we could rest in peace; that you would be all right, that everything would be all right. Hagrid came later, using Sirius' motorcycle, and we knew he'd never let anything happen to you. That's when we finally let go, when we released ourselves from this world....Before that, we'd seen Severus come and hold your mother's body...." The ghost gave a great sigh. "I never understood him, not really....I mean, I know why he let your mother go, but I still can't say I'd have done the same...."

"And now he's done it again," Harry said without thinking.

"Oh?" His father sounded surprised.

"Sirius." Harry needed only to say the one word.

"Hmm. Interesting. Although given Sirius and Severus' history, I have to wonder how much of that is because he's always carried a torch for your mother, and how much is because he's disliked Severus from the moment they met in our first year. They began hating each other on the *train*, if you can believe it..."

From his other life, Harry remembered Malfoy offering his hand in friendship (at the same time he was insulting Ron) on the Hogwarts express and Harry turning him down. "I can believe it," he told him. "But you haven't said why dad--I mean, why he broke up with Mum."

The apparition smiled gently. "That's fine, son. You can call him 'Dad;' you're used to it. He's been a good dad to you; you don't have to not call him that on my account. I've seen you all down here on the Quidditch pitch. It's a pity you didn't train to be a Chaser, but--oh well. Back to what I was saying: I was one of a gang of boys calling ourselves the Marauders..."

"Um, you can stop. I already know a lot of what you might be about to tell me." Harry went on to explain what happened in the Shrieking Shack in his third year in his other life, and going into Snape's Pensieve in his previous year in school and seeing him save Severus Snape from being stuck in the tunnel under the Whomping Willow with a slavering werewolf. And seeing his mother visiting both him and Severus Snape in the hospital wing afterward.

"Then--you and Mum were together. And I didn't find out until I was in this life that *he* was the one who broke up with her before the two of you got together, not the other way around."

James Potter nodded. "That's right. Oh, Sirius in particular gave him hell for it. Not because he wanted them to still be together. He gave him hell for being so colossally *stupid*, was how he put it. He said something along the lines of, 'If you think you're every going to get anybody even close to as wonderful as her ever again, you're either the vainest wizard on the planet or the stupidest.' Sirius has always been such a diplomat," he said with dry sarcasm.

Harry grimaced. "That still doesn't explain why he did it."

His father sighed and sat down in mid-air, crossing his legs. "After I saved him--things changed between them. I didn't really get the full gist at the time. I didn't find out, in fact, until we were planning the wedding and she was handing me the envelopes to tie to the owls' legs. When she handed me one with Severus Snape's name on it, you can imagine that I threw a bit of a wobbly."

"Did she explain why she wanted to invite him?"

"Yes, she finally did. Maybe she decided to let her guard down because we were about to join our lives together, or she was feeling particularly happy that day, I don't know. But the way she put it, after I saved his life, she started treating him horribly. I saw a little in the few classes we shared with the Slytherins; more than once, she made jokes at his expense. She told me it was worse than that; she discussed rather, er, intimate things around some of the other Slytherins when they were together, and they ribbed him mercilessly. The pattern continued for a while, until finally he told her that it wasn't working out and he broke up with her.

"The day we were sending out the invitations, she said that if it weren't for him, there wouldn't be any wedding. *I'm terrible at admitting I'm wrong, James, you know that. I knew I should break up with him because I wasn't in love with him anymore...* She said she'd fallen in love with me and thought about me all the time. But instead of breaking up with him and taking up with me, she lashed out at him with her passive aggressive behavior. All right, it was aggressive, but *not* so passive. *If it weren't for the fact that he had some self-respect, she told me, I'd still be with him, making both of our lives miserable.* She said that we should be grateful to him for refusing to be treated as horribly as she was treating him. I reminded her of how she had bawled her eyes out when he'd broken up with her, but she said that was her just her 'stupid ego.' He didn't want her? He was breaking up with her? Of course she was going to bawl."

"So she had kind of broken up with him by treating him horribly, but not really, so he did it the rest of the way?"

"That's right. And when I looked at it that way, I had to agree, and I can truthfully say that there wasn't an invitation I was gladder to be sending. She was probably right; if he hadn't done that, if he didn't have a healthy amount of self-respect--there wouldn't have been any wedding, any us."

"Um, if you don't mind my asking, after hearing why he broke up with her, why did you still want to marry her?"

He smiled. "She never treated me that way, Harry. Nor would she. Whether she knew it or not, she was trying to get him to do just what he did."

"And until I--I changed things, you two were together? Where--where were you?"

"If I told you it was heaven, I'm not sure you'd believe me. I'm not sure myself what it should be called, but since your mother was with me, I'm willing to call it heaven. If she were with me in hell, I'd probably call that heaven, too. When I was alive, I once heard hell defined as being thoroughly and irretrievably separated from God. Well, I was never very religious, which is why I was somewhat surprised by the afterlife...But I can legitimately say that being separated from your mother has been my hell."

"And I did that..." Harry whispered, his stomach lurching.

His father continued, "Last September, I suddenly found myself here, in the Quidditch changing rooms, and what's more, I remembered that I'd always been here, ever since the night I died. I also had a strange new memory of that night; after I died, I saw Voldemort go after you and your mother, just like before; but this time I sensed there were some other people nearby. I wasn't visible yet; ghosts have to learn to do that, you know. Being visible to living beings takes some practice, so I was--invisible, you could say. Which wasn't an altogether unfamiliar sensation; I had this Invisibility Cloak--"

"I know. It's mine now."

"Well, then. You know. At any rate, I couldn't believe what I saw. You were there, looking like you were about sixteen, and I could see a scar on your forehead. I don't know how I knew it was you; somehow, when you're dead, you see something and know much more than when you're alive. It was strange, like looking at myself, but your hair was cut differently....And you were with another Voldemort. I saw you point your wand at your mother, and the next thing I knew, she was promising you to the Voldemort who had killed me, and he put his wand on your head--and after he left, Severus came running into the garden and Lily--she just collapsed. He was comforting her...I couldn't bear to watch. I came here, where I'd felt so at home when I was in school, and I've been here ever

since. But I still remember being with your mother's essence, I remember a different death, a different afterlife...I want to be with your mother again, Harry, it's true. But you know that's not the only reason you need to fix things, right?"

He nodded miserably. "Right," he whispered.

"This was never meant to be..." his father said, fading slowly from view. Harry watched him disappear, until he wasn't really sure he'd been there.

"Father!" he cried out, his voice catching and his unshed tears making the room appear blurry. "Come back! Does Dumbledore know? Have you talked to my mother? To Sirius? To my stepfather?"

The door swung open. Ginny stood there, fully clothed again, including her robes and her cloak. "Harry? What's going on? Who were you talking to?"

He stared at her, trembling.

This was never meant to be...

He didn't answer her question. "Just help me hang the banners," he said tersely, standing and gesturing to the one on which he'd been sitting. He strode into the other team room and sent the banners flying up to their hanging rods with economical flourishes of his wand; he felt strong and able again, both physically and magically. He felt filled with purpose; his father had reminded him of what was important. He'd allowed himself to get sidetracked by too many things.

Harry went down the corridor to the outside door, waiting for Ginny. He tentatively opened the door, finding the opening heaped with snow. He blasted it away with his wand, then summoned his broomstick and a broomstick from the school supply. While he waited for the broomsticks, Ginny finally appeared.

"Oh, there you are," she said simply, running to the open doorway where he stood; she stopped abruptly when he turned his face to her and she saw the hard expression in his eyes.

"Hurry up; the broomsticks should be here any minute." His voice was harder than he'd intended and when he glanced at her briefly, she looked--oh, she looked so sad he almost relented, especially after...

"What have I done, Harry? We're still going to tell Charlie and Ron about us, aren't we?"

He took a deep breath and said, "There's nothing to tell."

"What do you mean 'nothing to tell.' I didn't mean we go into detail, for pete's sake, I meant--"

"I know what you meant. There's no 'us' to tell them about. After you were pulled into the lake--I've decided it's too dangerous for us to be together. Dangerous for you. We can't be a couple; I won't have you targeted. It's over, Ginny. If you're to be safe--"

He turned, afraid he would relent upon seeing her tear-streaked face, but he saw instead that she was furious.

"Oh, and you think you're the only one who has any say in all this? You think you can make love to me and then turn around and *abandon* me?"

"I didn't start that...."

"You certainly *finished* it!"

"I told you--" but he couldn't go on. It still gave him an ache in his chest to think that she hadn't been as over-the-moon about it as he was--at least, until he realized how it *had* been for her, and he also came crashing back to earth...

Harry turned away from her, not wanting to look at her while answering, but just at that moment, he saw his broom hurtling toward him. He reached up and grabbed it with one hand, then mounted it. The broom he'd summoned for her arrived a moment later, and she snatched it deftly from the air, glaring at him.

"There's nothing else to discuss, Ginny. It's better this way." He pushed off and flew toward the West Tower. He didn't look for her until he landed on the top of the tower. He saw her fly to the Astronomy Tower instead of where he was, looking like she was wiping tears from her face. She didn't look in his direction, but immediately disappeared through the trap door down into the Astronomy classroom. He turned with a heavy heart and descended the stairs of the West Tower, into the gloomy castle.

* * * * *

He saw her again all too soon, in the hospital wing; he remembered that he'd urged her to go to Madam Pomfrey as soon as she returned, and she'd done it. Madam Pomfrey had been out of the room when Harry came into the infirmary; Ginny was sitting on the edge of a bed, swinging her legs. Her robes were off, but she still wore the clothes she'd had on under them.

"She's getting me some potion," Ginny said, not looking at him. She sounded upset; Harry's heart turned over.

"I--I came because of my toes. They don't feel right. After walking in the blizzard barefoot."

She nodded, looking out a window. Nothing was right about this, he thought. When they were together--it should have been phoenix song and fireworks, and afterward they should have been competing to use the most superlatives in proclaiming their love for each other....What's wrong with me? he wondered. He was never able to tell Hermione he loved her, and he loved Ginny, but he couldn't make her happy....And he remembered the way Lucius Malfoy had tried to get at him through Hermione. Had Mr. Malfoy put that creature in the lake? he wondered. Had he seen him and Ginny walking on the grounds?

Madam Pomfrey brought a steaming beaker of some greyish potion into the room and had given it to Ginny to drink before she looked up and noticed Harry.

"Potter! It's about time! Miss Weasley told me what happened to the two of you."

He swallowed. "She did?"

"Yes. How the two of you were stuck in the blizzard. We had half the school out looking for you before the storm made it impossible--"

"Oh, right. I mean--I need you to look at my feet--"

She nodded briskly and had him climb onto a bed and remove his shoes and socks. She clucked when she saw his toes. "It's a good job you came when you did! Nasty thing, amputation..."

"*Amputation!*"

"Because of frostbite. Oh, I'm not saying you'll have to have any toes amputated. Not now that you've come in. If you'd waited much longer, though..."

He heaved a sigh of relief. "Then you can do something about it?"

She sniffed and had an offended air about her now; he'd questioned her professional ability. "Of course I can, Potter. What do you take me for?"

He apologized softly and leaned back on the pillows to wait while she went into the apothecary. He looked over at Ginny, on the other side of the infirmary, but she wouldn't meet his gaze. He remembered the warmth of her body pressed against him under the cozy house banners....

Madam Pomfrey hustled back into the infirmary; as she walked, she looked down at the watch she wore as a pendant around her neck; to

anyone else this watch looked like it was upside down, but to Madam Pomfrey, it appeared right-side up.

"All right, Miss Weasley; that potion should have worked by now. You can leave. Give this note to your head-of-house. Professor Black was worried sick about you, and those brothers of yours...he'll have to call your parents, too, to let them know you're all right."

Ginny thanked her and donned her robes again, carrying her cloak draped over her arm; she passed by Harry, her eyes blazing with love and hate, and he had to turn away from her. As soon as Pomfrey released him, he had to go see so many people....

It took a while for the potion she'd concocted to work. It was topical, rather than internal, applied to his frozen toes and covered with bandages like a boneset. He pulled his shoes on over the bandages and was able to walk, although it was a little awkward. He carried a note for his head-of-house, but as that was also his step-father and he wanted to talk to both of his parents together, he went down to the Great Hall and used the hidden passage to reach his mother's office, grunting as he pushed the pivoting wall. He returned the wall to its original position (he didn't even know whether his mother was aware of the secret passage into her office). After lighting the fire, he threw some powder from a bowl on the mantel into the fire and said clearly, "Professors Evans and Snape."

He waited and waited; finally, he leaned down and shouted into the firebox, "Mum! Dad! Is anyone there?"

He pulled back when his stepfather's face suddenly appeared in the fire. "Harry! Where are you? When did you get back? We've been frantic; Draco said you'd gone walking around the lake, then the storm hit; we tried looking for you, but there was no sign of you down there, and then we had to fall back; the storm had become too severe...worst thing I've seen in my entire life..."

"I'll explain; can I come up to the staff wing? Where's Mum?"

"Still asleep; of course, come up; I'll let you in."

It was very early still and a Saturday to boot, so the castle was deathly quiet as Harry ran up the six flights to the tapestry hiding the staff quarters; he lifted the heavy woolen hanging and found that the passage was already open, his dad standing guard. He motioned Harry inside the hidden corridor and closed the entrance again; they proceeded to the Snape/Evans rooms without words.

When they were in the sitting room, Harry threw himself into a chair, panting from his run up the stairs. His stepfather thrust a mug of

steaming tea into his hands, and Harry gulped it greedily, ignoring his burned tongue. When he had drained the mug, he looked up at his dad.

"There are--there are some things I should tell you. I should have, before, but--oh, I don't know what I was thinking--"

His dad sat down on the opposite side of the fire. "Tell me about it, Harry."

But suddenly, Harry sprung up. "I want Mum here. She should know too." He strode over to the room where his mother slept now, opening the door, then stopping short when he saw the neatly made-up bed; it was obvious that no one had slept there the previous night. He turned to his dad, incredulous.

"She spent last night with *him*? When you all didn't know where I was?"

"Harry, please, you don't understand--"

"Oh, I think I do! She--"

But he froze; his mother had appeared in the doorway of his stepfather's bedroom, wearing his dressing gown, and, judging by the way she held it closed at the throat, nothing else *but* the dressing gown. Harry averted his eyes from her, feeling a warmth spread over his face; he looked at his dad instead, but even the pale skin of Severus Snape was tinged with color, knowing that his stepson knew what had occurred the previous evening.

"I'll get dressed," his mother mumbled, zipping past him into her bedroom; her clothes were probably in the wardrobe in there, Harry realized. What did this mean? That she was cheating on Sirius with her husband? Could that even be *called* cheating? Did they just take comfort in each other for one night? Harry shook himself mentally; he should *not* be thinking about this. And his stepfather; why should he be so embarrassed about spending the night with his own wife? Then Harry wondered whether they might heal their rift; had his disappearing into the storm brought them back together? He sat down again near the fire, feeling hopeful, resisting the urge to check the bed where they'd slept to see whether it was relatively undisturbed or in complete disarray....

When she returned to the sitting room, she looked neat as a pin, as always, and her black robes swished imperiously while she walked. She took a mug of tea from her husband, smiling at him, and her face became flushed again when their fingers touched. She sat on the couch that faced the fire, looking to her left at her son and then to her right at her husband as she drank. When the mug was only half empty, she placed it on the low table before her and turned to look at Harry sternly.

"Suppose you tell us where you were last night, young man."

She was going to *scold* him?

"No. Suppose you let me talk and keep quiet until I'm done," he said in an authoritative voice. "I have quite a lot to say that you both should hear."

His mother tried to look offended, but mostly he thought she seemed hurt. She nodded, and he went on.

"First thing you need to know: when the Board of Governors came to Hogwarts to end the General Strike, Lucius Malfoy came to see me and Draco in our tent. He told us what Voldemort wants us to do." They looked at him, tenseness showing in their faces. "I was told to kill Ron Weasley, and Draco was told to take care of Ginny Weasley. Mr. Malfoy said Ron was to be killed for heading up the strike, and Ginny for helping him. Actually, he thinks she gave him the idea." He looked at his parents, puzzled; they were exchanging odd looks. Then something occurred to him. "Wait--the other person who met with the Board was Charlie, representing the staff. Professor McGonagall deferred all of the strike negotiations to him..." He stared at his stepfather, growing more and more alarmed and yet surer and surer with every passing second.

"Dad! Mr. Malfoy told you to do something too, didn't he? He told you to kill Charlie, didn't he?" His stepfather looked up, his eyes wild, then down at his hands, nodding. "Oh, Dad, you can't! You can't do it!"

His dad wrung his hands. "Don't you think I know that, Harry? I've spoken to Albus about it. I do wish you'd told me about you and Draco, though..."

Harry thrust out his jaw. "Well, I'm not going to do it of course. And neither is Draco--" But he stopped, uncertain now. How did someone know he and Ginny would be walking down by the lake? Who was already at the school, who was chums with the Care of Magical Creatures teacher and might be able to smuggle an exotic egg out of his office, not even knowing what it might hatch into? Who might be able to put Imperius on the creature, to get it to grab Ginny? Harry remembered his dad saying that he thought Lucius Malfoy might have taught Draco some "extra" things. When he'd occasionally asked Draco what he did during the summers, he was more than a little cagey. Could his best friend have set the creature on Ginny?

Harry swallowed. "I--I think another Death Eater went after Ginny last night. A creature pulled her into the lake, and I went in and got her out. That was probably why you didn't find us down there; we must have been under the water still. It took a while."

His parents looked confused. "How could you have been underwater all that long, Harry?" his mother said shakily. He explained to them about summoning the knife and the Gillyweed, and his mother put her hand over her mouth.

"You can do a summoning charm from that distance? That's *very* advanced magic, Harry..." Harry winced, hearing the echo of Hermione saying the same thing about his Patronus.

"Then, when we got out, the storm was so bad; I had to carry her. We tried to head for the castle, but when we banged into the Quidditch changing rooms, we took shelter in there. This morning, I summoned brooms for us and we came back to the castle."

His parents were silent; his mother drained her tea mug, then stood, pacing. "*Whatever is necessary...whatever is necessary...*" she mumbled, wringing her hands while she walked back and forth.

"What?" he asked his mother. She stopped and turned to them.

"Listen; until you two do what's being asked of you, neither of you will have any peace. Ron and Charlie Weasley--and probably Ginny Weasley--need to go into hiding. Although the best thing really would be to fake their deaths...." she mumbled, trailing off, staring into space with narrowed eyes.

Her husband nodded. "Yes, but faking their deaths so that the Death Eaters think we did it, but the authorities don't. That's a rather delicate balancing act. And the governors need to reinstate the ban; otherwise, bad things *will* start to happen, in order to make it seem unwise to bring Muggle-born students back into the school."

Harry frowned. "But that's just what they want! We can't let that happen!"

His mother glared at him. "I don't care about them. And don't go on about my being Muggle-born; what I care most about is *you*, Harry, and I will do whatever is necessary to keep you safe."

He looked at his mother, who was at least as fierce as any mother bear protecting her young. "I can handle it, Mum. I'll talk to the three of them about the hiding. If they disappear, can't we just contact Mr. Malfoy and claim to have killed them? Say that we covered our tracks really well, no one will ever find the bodies?"

His father looked grim. "I'll consider all our options. If we say that--that we killed them--and they turn up perfectly healthy and alive--"

Harry nodded. "We have to make sure that doesn't happen."

He stood to go, then abruptly sat down again.

"Oh, there's one more thing, I almost forgot: why didn't you ever tell me?"

His parents looked at each other, bewildered. "Tell you what?" his dad asked innocently.

"That my father's ghost is haunting the Quidditch changing rooms."

They looked at each other, flabbergasted. "We thought you knew!" his mother exclaimed. "You mean--"

"I only just found out. Last night. This morning, actually. Who else knows?"

His dad shrugged. "I'm not sure I can think of anyone who *doesn't* know. We all thought you did."

"Does Jamie?"

"She might, but she doesn't like Quidditch, so I don't know; she doesn't ever have a reason to go down to the changing rooms..."

Harry jerked his head up. He remembered something; when his sister had started at Hogwarts, she had visited him once after a match, but when Harry had gone to meet her in one of the team rooms after his post-game shower, before he could even talk to her, she ran out crying, and said she would never return....

She must have seen their father's ghost. Perhaps he had told her she should never have been born...? No, that would be too cruel. Perhaps it was just that she took it very hard, her father dying before she was even born. He remembered other times when she'd been very sensitive about this. Even her reaction to him cutting his hair. It all made sense now....

"Well," he said shakily. "I want to find Draco. I have a thing or two to discuss with him...." Like whether he'd tried to kill Ginny.

"Harry," his stepfather said, "you and Draco come to the caretaker's office in an hour. We need to talk all together."

Harry nodded. He left the staff wing and ran down to the dungeons, to the Slytherin common room. When he went into the sixth-year boys' dorm, he found Draco still in bed, fast asleep. Harry whipped the covers off him abruptly and started bellowing at him, "Get up, Malfoy! We need to talk!"

Draco turned over sleepily, rubbing his eyes. Norman Nott looked up as well, a frown on his face; Blaise Zabini was already gone. "Harry?" Draco mumbled sleepily, then sat up abruptly, staring at his best friend with round eyes.

"Harry! You're all right!"

"Yeah, if someone can be all right who's gone from swimming in the lake to walking in a blizzard. I have to say, I've felt *better*," he snarled at the blond boy. His friend edged subtly away from Harry, looking frightened.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Draco's voice shook.

"Just go take your shower and get dressed. We're to be in the caretaker's office in less than an hour. We both have detention with him this morning."

"*Detention!* What did *I* do?"

"What? Don't you have a guilty conscience?" Harry said between clenched teeth. Draco's eyebrows flew up.

"You're *mental*, Harry, that's what you are. I think being out in the storm has iced your *brain*."

"And don't go up to the prefects' bathroom; do it down here. We don't have time to waste."

Draco rose, grabbing his dressing gown and some clean boxers (black, with Welsh green dragons) and heading toward the boys' showers grumbling about being a prefect and being able to do as he damn well pleased--but he still didn't leave Slytherin house.

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, looking down at his hands, shaking. *If Draco was responsible for that thing in the lake....*

Nott looked at him apprehensively until Harry barked at him, "What are *you* looking at?"

The other boy didn't move. "My dad," he said softly, "saw you. He said he saw you on the night of the solstice." Harry stared back at him; Nott knew! Oh, this was *not* good....

"Can I--" Nott whispered tentatively "--can I see it?"

See it? *He wanted to see the Dark Mark.* Harry swallowed, then rose and walked over to the other bed, sitting at the foot. He looked toward the door, then slowly pulled up his sleeve. It looked oddly small now, no more than an inch-and-a-half in diameter. Nott looked down at Harry's arm, his expression unreadable.

"Did it--did it hurt?"

Harry nodded, trying to look like a very grim Death Eater. "It hurt like hell. As bad as or worse than Cruciatus. He did that, too."

Nott sat back, awed. "When you say *he*, you mean--"

"Yes."

Nott looked at Harry's arm again, then up at his face; he looked frightened to Harry. Was he dreading being initiated? Had his father threatened it for years? Harry couldn't take the chance that he was sympathetic; he had to assume that Nott was hostile and likely to rat him out to his father.

Harry rose and came closer to the shaking, round-eyed boy. "Remember," he hissed through his teeth menacingly, "*don't mess with me, Nott.*"

The other boy nodded, and Harry wished he could be honest with him. He probably wasn't a bad bloke. He wished he could say, *I'm really a spy. I've hidden Voldemort's wand. I kept him from benefiting from killing his grandson. I'm a golden griffin Animagus.*

But he didn't dare tell any of these things to someone whose loyalties were uncertain. He went to the common room to wait for Draco. *I should have reminded Draco not to mess with me either,* he thought. Finally, his best friend strode into the room in fresh robes, his pale hair shining from his shower, his silver prefect badge reflecting the flames from the snake sconces on the walls.

"Let's go," Harry said to him shortly, opening the doorway to the corridor. He walked briskly toward the caretaker's office, not bothering to see whether Draco was keeping pace with him, but when he stopped to knock on the door, the other boy was indeed by his side.

An unseen hand opened the door, and they entered to find the caretaker and Severus Snape waiting for them. The door swung shut behind them and with a wave of his wand, Harry's stepfather produced a tray of tea and scones. The boys sat on one side of the desk, the adults on the other. Draco looked around, frowning.

"What did I do to get detention?"

Harry made a face at him. "You prat! We're not really here for detention. This is a spy meeting!"

Draco looked alarmed, then motioned to Dumbledore with his head. "Harry," he said softly through clenched teeth, "*he's here....*"

Then Harry hit himself on the forehead and realized there was a rather important thing he'd neglected to do. "Bloody hell! I forgot to tell you--Mr. White is actually Dumbledore. We're working for him."

Draco's jaw dropped as Dumbledore, appearing every inch like an amiable old caretaker, smiled at him, the edges of his eyes crinkling.

"Dumbledore! But--but I heard you left the school years ago!"

Dumbledore nodded in a bored fashion, helping himself to a scone and some clotted cream. "Yes, yes. That was the impression we wished to give. But I have been here all along." He narrowed his eyes, looking at Draco more directly now. "I have quite a file on you, Mr. Malfoy--"

Draco squirmed in his chair; knowing his friend's history with girls, Harry could imagine what was in the file.

--and when I learned that you were going to work for me, I was gratified that someone with so much covert experience was finally going to put it to good use." Draco stared at him incredulously as Dumbledore's face lost its grim expression and his bright blue eyes twinkled at him and Harry. Harry almost laughed, but then he remembered the little problem he was having with Draco just now.

"That's if you really *have* decided to work on the right side," Harry said, looking at Draco through slitted eyes. "I'm not completely convinced."

His best friend stared at him, his face blank and guileless. "What are you on about, Harry? Of course I have."

"Oh really? Then tell me who was responsible for putting a kelpie-squid-snake hybrid into the lake and hexing it so it would pull Ginny in?"

Draco opened his mouth, but no sound came out for a good minute. "I don't know! How should I know?"

Harry stared at him. "You were told to kill her. How do I know you didn't decide to do it after all, to protect yourself?"

"Because--because I didn't! You have to believe me, Harry! A *what* hybrid? I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm *not* trying to kill Ginny. She's my girlfriend's friend, and your girlfriend! You think I would do that?"

"*Ginny Weasley is your girlfriend?*" Harry's stepfather cried in surprise. Then he looked at Draco. "And you have a girlfriend? I mean, just one?"

Harry looked sheepishly at his dad. "Yeah. Jamie," he said softly.

Harry's stepfather was now livid, rising and leaning over the desk in Draco's direction, bellowing so that Harry was worried that all of the school would hear. "*My daughter?* Harry, you've let *him* near *Jamie*?"

"Stepdaughter!" Draco exclaimed defensively, shrinking into his chair and looking far more afraid now of Harry's stepfather than he had of Voldemort during the initiation.

"Whatever!" Severus Snape bellowed, looking like he was going to hex Draco into the middle of next week. Harry gave him no help.

"Nice going," Harry said sarcastically to his best friend. "First you told the twins about me and Ginny, now this--"

"Yeah, any time you need me to be your best friend for *fourteen years*, just let me know...."

Harry calmed down, looking back and forth between his dad and Draco. Dumbledore had put a hand on Severus Snape's wand arm; Harry just now noticed the wand held in his white-knuckled fist. He reluctantly pocketed the wand and sat at Dumbledore's silent behest, but he didn't take his eyes off the boy who presumed to lay a finger on his little girl; Harry remembered him saying that he had helped Madam Pomfrey with Jamie's delivery. *He really thinks of her as his actual daughter*, Harry realized.

He turned back to his friend, trying to overcome his suspicion and paranoia. "I'm sorry, Draco. It's just that--it seemed too coincidental, with you being told to kill her and all...."

Draco sniffed. "It's all right," he said quietly and a little resentfully, sounding like it was anything but. "Shows what a lot of faith you have in me..."

"Draco! I said I'm sorry!" Harry was frustrated; rather than bickering about this, they should be getting Ron, Ginny and Charlie out of harm's way as soon as possible. He looked up at Dumbledore.

"Did Dad tell you everything?"

Dumbledore nodded and put his hands together. "Of course, while it may have been a Malfoy who put the egg that produced that creature in the lake, I don't think it was the Malfoy in this room..."

Draco's eyes opened very wide. "You think it was my dad?"

"He may have wished to protect you from Voldemort's wrath, I think. If he did it. It is one possibility."

The boys digested this information thoroughly; Harry was glad no one was dwelling on the fact that he and Ginny had spent the night alone together in the Quidditch changing rooms.

"Harry, Draco--we already sent owls to Ron, Ginny and Charlie. They should be down here any minute," Harry's dad said. "And they should probably know about the three of us."

"About us being spies," Harry said softly. His stepfather nodded.

But he'd no sooner said this than there was a tap at the door. Dumbledore clapped his hands and it swung open, revealing the three Weasleys; Ron's and Ginny's prefect badges glittered in the candlelight. Ginny stopped short when she saw Harry, and she bristled. Her brothers didn't notice. Ron was frowning.

"What's going on here? Professor Snape? Mr. White? Why were we told to come here?"

Dumbledore urged them to come in and shut the door. "Charlie, Ron, Ginny--I'm afraid you will need to go into hiding."

The three of them looked at each other, then at him. "What?" Ron and Ginny said together.

"Because of your instrumental roles in the General Strike, you are being targeted by Voldemort and his followers and you are not be safe, even here. I have--contacts that can help you--"

"What?" Ron said alone this time, his voice rising in pitch. "We're to go into hiding? Just like that? Because of the General Strike?" He turned to face Harry angrily. "This is all your fault! It was your idea to have me head up the strike! And now look where it's got me; with a price on my head!"

"Harry?" his stepfather said, his brow furrowed. "Is this true?"

Harry grimaced and nodded. "Why do you think I want to make sure nothing happens to them? I can't have them taking the blame for what I planned and organized...."

"Except we *are!*" Ron insisted. "Well, I, for one, refuse to go. I've always felt safe at Hogwarts, and at Hogwarts I'll stay!"

Charlie looked at him fondly and put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "And so will I."

Ginny straightened up and said, "Me too," in a voice that was probably softer and more frightened-sounding than she'd intended. Harry stared at the three of them, incredulous.

"Are you mad? On the night of the solstice, I saw--" but he stopped. Ginny was the only one of the three of them who knew about the initiation, and

their being spies. How could he explain that there was a Death Eater working as a teacher? Maybe *that* was who had put the hybrid egg in the lake...unless that teacher was actually an operative. He wished he dared ask Dumbledore the names of all of his operatives, but he wasn't sure whether the old wizard would divulge this; he might think it safer for them if fewer people knew who they were. Charlie and Ron were staring at Harry, perplexed. He cleared his throat and turned to Dumbledore, his eyes pleading for help. Dumbledore gestured for them all to sit; suddenly, chairs had appeared behind the three of them, and they settled into them nervously.

Dumbledore explained it all to them; the Prophecy, the promise Harry's mother made to Voldemort, the way Draco had also been spared and promised to the dark wizard.

"And now," Ron said, an edge to his voice, "you two are supposed to kill us?" He pointed at himself and Ginny. Charlie looked back and forth between his siblings and his friends, swallowing; then he appeared to think of something else.

"And why do *I* need to go into hiding? Is someone supposed to kill me, too?"

Severus Snape, who'd always gotten along well with his colleague, slowly raised his hand, looking the younger man in the eye, an expression of remorse twisting his features. Harry could see Charlie swallow again.

Ron shook his head. "But why are *you* telling us this, Mr. White? You're just the caretaker..."

Dumbledore sighed and stood up. "I am. But I will no longer hide from you that I am also the former headmaster. Let me take this annoying engorgement charm off my nose..." With a flick of his wand, he did, and Dumbledore's characteristic long, crooked nose appeared at last. He reached into his desk drawer and withdrew a pair of half-moon spectacles and then looked over them at Ginny, Ron and Charlie. Except for his shabby robes and short hair, he looked as Harry was accustomed to seeing him--if a bit tired from patrolling the corridors of the castle all night.

Charlie sprung to his feet. "Professor!" he cried. Harry remembered that Dumbledore would have been headmaster still when Charlie finished school. Ron and Ginny probably had no idea what Albus Dumbledore should look like, but Charlie knew perfectly well.

"Sit, Charlie, sit. Yes, it is me. I have been working here for many reasons; to assist Minerva, to make sure Hogwarts remains safe from Voldemort, especially as there are even those on the staff who--well never mind that now. I am also here because this is a safe place from which to

coordinate the operatives who work for me against the Death Eaters and against Voldemort, and who do not always operate, shall we say, strictly within the confines of wizarding law. Harry, Draco and Severus are three who work for me. That is why I am concerned with protecting them. Putting you into hiding isn't just for your benefit, although I believe you *will* be safer by doing this. If they can claim to have carried out the instructions they were given, they and their loved ones will be safe. If not—certain things may begin to occur to 'convince' them to carry out their orders. Which they never will, of course..."

Charlie stared at him. "You're telling me that the three of them are *spies*?"

Dumbledore nodded. Charlie looked at Harry and Draco as if seeing the boys he'd known for more than five years for the first time. Ron looked like he could be knocked over with a feather.

"Slytherins? Spies?" he said in derision. "You have *got* to be kidding..."

But then Harry saw his dad catch Ron's eye, and Ron stopped talking, his ears turning red.

"Yes," Dumbledore assured him. "Slytherins. Spies. In these troubled times, Ron, we need to stop basing our expectations of people on archaic criteria such as their Hogwarts house."

"Do we actually have to disappear? I have a job to do here; it's only the beginning of February. There are five more months of school left," Charlie said.

Dumbledore looked at him sadly. He opened his mouth to speak, but an urgent knock was heard at the door, and then Harry heard his mother's voice.

"Severus! Are you in there?" She sounded frantic. Harry leaped to his feet and flung open the door.

"Mum! What is it?"

"Lily!" his stepfather cried. "Get in here and close the door! Before someone sees us all together!"

She slammed the door behind her, then turned and looked at the gathering, perplexed. "What are you all doing here?" She stared at the Weasleys. "And Albus! Your nose!"

Dumbledore rubbed his tender nose again. "It's such a relief to take that charm off sometimes, Lily. Besides, I was explaining to Charlie who I really am..."

"And we were discussing the three of them," Harry nodded at Ginny and her brothers, "going into hiding."

She glared at him, suddenly belligerent. Harry was utterly confused.

"Well, it's too damn late!" she cried.

Her husband was on his feet and at her side in a trice. He held her upper arms tightly. "Tell me what happened!" he hissed between his teeth. Harry realized he was clenching his jaw painfully. Oh no, oh no, oh no, he thought. If anything's happened to Jamie....

"It's Stuart," his mother finally sobbed, collapsing against her husband, who enfolded her in his arms. Harry and Draco looked at each other; this they were not expecting. "Simon found the note this morning..." They saw Harry's mother remove a piece of parchment from her pocket and hand it to her husband; he glanced at it, and grew paler than pale, then handed it to Harry.

To Stuart Snape's father and brother--

If you want to see him alive again, you know what you must do.

It was unsigned. Harry's heart was beating frantically; he handed the note to Dumbledore, who read it aloud. Ginny leapt up and threw her arms around Harry.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry! We should go away--of course we should--"

"Ginny!" her brothers said simultaneously, shocked by this display.

Harry and Ginny separated, but he said to her, "No, Ginny, *I'm* sorry. I was being stupid this morning; I didn't want to hurt you, you know, only protect you--"

Now Ron was on his feet, glaring at Harry. "*This morning!* You mean--it was *you*?"

Harry frowned at him. Had Ginny said something? "What was me?"

"The other lost student!" Ron ran his fingers through his hair repeatedly until it seemed that every last hair was standing upright. "The headmistress had just about everyone in fifth, sixth and seventh years out looking for two students who were lost out in the storm--and she came to me and Charlie and told us that Ginny was one of them. We were forced to come back to the castle when it got too bad...I didn't sleep at all last night! I thought she was dead. Then she comes waltzing in this

morning..." He glared at his sister. "You never said the other student was Potter!"

"You didn't ask!" she answered, helplessly.

Harry looked at him nervously; there seemed to be an *awful* lot of people in the room. "We--we just took shelter in the Quidditch changing rooms--I summoned broomsticks for us and we flew back to the castle this morning," he said quietly.

Ginny linked her arm through his. "Are we all right now?" she whispered up at him. He stared down at her tenderly. How could he ever have considered separating from her?

"Yes," he said quietly, looking into her eyes. "Always."

Ron was as red as his hair now, and even though Charlie had a good hold on Ron's robes, he didn't look any happier with Harry. "The two of you. All night. In the Quidditch changing rooms." He looked like a volcano getting ready to erupt. Ginny held Harry's arm even more tightly.

"Well, better my boyfriend than a perfect stranger!" she said hotly to her brothers. Oh boy, Harry thought; we get a *triple* dose of the Weasley temper.

"Boyfriend!" Charlie exclaimed, an unmistakable look of betrayal on his face; he could probably understand Harry not telling Ron, but not telling *him*, his favorite teacher and good friend? Harry winced; Charlie looked so hurt.

"Do you mean to say you were with Potter all night and he's your *boyfriend*?" Ron demanded. Ginny huddled closer to Harry now, and nodded. Harry couldn't meet Ron's eyes. Then he wished he had, for he might have seen Ron coming. Suddenly, Charlie lost his grip on his youngest brother's robes as Ron flew across the room, grasping Harry by the front of his robes and pulling up, making him stand on tiptoe and look into the very angry face of Ronald Weasley.

"Potter!" he shouted in Harry's face. "*Did you shag my sister?*"

Harry looked at him helplessly and moved his jaw, but nothing came out. There was no graceful way around this. But then Ginny pushed between them and shoved Ron backward, as though she'd done this many times in her life (and maybe she had). She stood in front of Harry, reaching behind her to pull his hands forward and wrap them around her waist. She held them there, so that Harry had to stand right against her back and look at the others over her shoulder, his Ginny-shield.

"I'll have you know," she said proudly, her chin lifted into the air, "that *I* seduced *him*."

Harry closed his eyes, groaning; great, just great, he thought. Let's just announce it to a whole room of people, including my *parents*...

"All right, Harry!" Draco said suddenly, slapping Harry on the back and grinning; he immediately froze as everyone in the room but Ginny, Harry and Dumbledore glared at him menacingly. Draco colored slightly and sat again.

"*And I'll have you know that I was pulled into the lake by some bewitched creature and would have died if Harry hadn't gone in and pulled me out, so before you complain about us--*"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn if Harry is shagging a goat!" his mother cried out suddenly, her voice harsh. "I want my son back!"

Harry felt Ginny bristle, and he whispered to her, "*She's not calling you a goat.*" Ron still looked like he might kill Harry, and Charlie didn't look like Harry was his favorite person either, just now. Dumbledore, Harry thought, looked far too amused.

"Everyone, please sit. I think I have a plan of action." He conjured up a chair for Harry's mother, and the rest of them returned to the chairs they'd been using previously. When they were all seated again, Dumbledore looked very seriously at Ron. "How many people saw you this morning?"

Ron shrugged, still frowning at Harry and Ginny. "I dunno--I was in a chair by the fire in the Gryffindor common room, and then Ginny came in and this owl started pecking at the window all at the same time. It was from you, telling us to get down here."

"So none of your housemates saw you? Did you meet anyone on the way to my office?" Ron shook his head. Dumbledore nodded. "Good, very good..." he muttered, putting his hands together lightly and staring at his fingertips. They all waited what seemed an interminable time before he spoke again. "As caretaker," he said in a musing sort of voice, "I have learned much more about this castle than I ever knew as headmaster....

"You can go into hiding and still remain here, within the walls of Hogwarts and the protection that offers. I know just the place for you. You will write out a note addressed to Professor Black, explaining that you left the castle during the night to look for your sister out in the storm. It will be assumed that you were both lost. Draco and Harry will no longer be able to kill you since it will seem that you are already dead. You will not go into hiding at this time, Charlie, because that would seem to be too much of a coincidence following on the heels of Ron's and Ginny's disappearances.

That will have to do for now. We must hope that even though *you* have clearly come to no harm," he nodded at Charlie, "Professors Snape and Evans may be able to recover their son."

They all stared around, unsure about this solution. "What about our parents?" Ron asked, his voice raspy. "They'll know we're all right, of course?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "That is too risky. They will know eventually, but for now, I think--"

"No!" Charlie exclaimed, standing again. "You can't do this to my mum! We've only just found Maggie again--"

Dumbledore looked utterly bewildered. "Maggie?"

"Margaret," Ginny said quietly. "We've found Margaret. One of our lost sisters."

Dumbledore looked shocked, then smiled. "I had no idea. How wonderful!"

"No! This is *not* wonderful! You can't ask me to not tell my mother that Ron and Ginny are all right--you just can't!" Charlie looked the most distraught Harry had ever seen him.

Dumbledore looked sadly at Charlie. "I don't want to put a memory charm on you, my boy, but if I must, I will. Your parents must plan a funeral; a double funeral. Why don't we say--afterward, you can tell them the truth. That they are alive. But you cannot tell them where. Will that do?"

Charlie thought about this, and turned to Ron and Ginny. "It's your fake deaths we're talking about here. What do you think?"

Ginny looked at Harry with a dreadful expression. "I hate to think of Mum not knowing--"

"She will know soon, Ginny, she will know soon," Dumbledore said to her gently. Ron was still giving Harry the evil eye. Charlie turned to Dumbledore again.

"All right," he sighed resignedly. "And you're sure they'll be safe? No one will be able to find them? And they'll be looked after?"

"Not only that," the former headmaster said, standing, "I will expect them to keep up with their studies. As caretaker, I can go anywhere I want at any time; I will obtain your lessons and set you examinations myself," he said sternly to Ron and Ginny. "Since you will not have any opportunity for socializing, I expect both of you to *excel*, is that understood?"

Harry could tell it felt strange to them to be receiving orders such as these from *the caretaker*, but they both looked at him solemnly and said, "Yes, sir."

He turned toward the blank wall behind him and said, "All right. Let's go." With a wave of his wand, the gigantic blocks of stone dissolved, leaving a doorway in the shape of a pointed Gothic arch; Harry could clearly see stone steps ascending just beyond the opening, and flickering light, probably from torches on the walls.

Ron and Ginny looked at each other uncertainly. "Now? We have to go into hiding right now?"

"But--but--I went to see Madam Pomfrey!" Ginny suddenly remembered. "She knows I didn't die in the storm!"

Dumbledore turned, taking in this information. "Oh? Oh my...that's too bad. I suppose I shall have to put a memory charm on poor Poppy before she says anything..."

Harry's stepfather rose. "I'll take care of it, Albus," he said, before opening the door quickly and striding out.

"I'll go with him," his mother said, also leaving, throwing a disturbing look over her shoulder at her eldest son. Harry had no opportunity to analyze that look before she was gone.

Ron and Ginny looked to the old man, who nodded sadly to them. "Yes, I'm afraid it must be now. We cannot risk anyone else seeing either one of you."

They were all standing now, Dumbledore at the arched opening, Ron and Ginny about to go through, but hesitating. Charlie stepped over to them and pulled Ron into a rough hug, then threw his arms around Ginny, squeezing her tightly; Harry could see his eyes glistening with tears.

"You two will be safe," he said thickly. "I trust Dumbledore to take care of you. Too bad you never knew what it was like to have him for a headmaster..."

Dumbledore nodded to him and said, "Why don't you go call your parents? You need to tell them the news that Ron and Ginny are missing. And I will tell Minerva the truth, but remind her that we need to behave as though Ron and Ginny are still out there to be found. We will continue to have the teachers and students search. Tell your parents that will be happening." Charlie swallowed and nodded before he left.

Dumbledore turned to Draco. "And why don't you send an owl to your father, telling him about the disappearances of Ron and Ginny and

perhaps suggesting subtly that you and Harry might be responsible--?"
Draco looked confused at first, then understanding slowly dawned on him.

"Oh! Right, right!" He practically ran from the room. Dumbledore said to Ron, "Up with you now! We've a long climb. Best to get started."

Ron looked uncertainly at Harry and Ginny, anger and resentment still etched in his freckled features. "What about *them*?"

Dumbledore looked at the two of them and smiled benignly. "I think we need to give them a few moments alone. Come!" He nudged Ron through the doorway; his gangly limbs seemed to be all over the place and he looked like he might launch himself at Harry again, but finally, he let himself be led docilely to his hiding place. Before Dumbledore went through the opening, Harry saw his blue eyes twinkling at him, and he smiled at the old man gratefully.

When they were both gone, Harry turned to Ginny, but he didn't have a chance to say anything before she had launched herself at Harry, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling his mouth down to hers. He opened his lips and drank her in, holding her face up with one hand, bringing his other hand around to press against the small of her back; he kissed her as though he never would again, feeling her fingers entwined in his hair, her warm body pressed again him. He saw a million images of her in his mind; as a little girl at the World Cup; the first time she walked in the doors of the Great Hall, nervous about being sorted; catching the Snitch during a Quidditch match, her face radiant as she took her victory lap; her distraught expression when he realized she'd kissed him because she'd lost a *bet*....

He broke the kiss and pulled her to him even more closely, pressing his face into her hair, trying not to cry. He pulled back and looked at her, his hands framing her face. "I love you, Ginny. I love you so much...."

She nodded. "I love you, too," she whispered hoarsely; she sounded as though her throat were too constricted to function. She started crying first; he tasted the saltiness as he lavished kisses on her forehead, her cheeks, the orbits beneath her brows, her chin, her nose....Finally, he realized that he had to make her go, before he started to weep as well. We'll be together again, he told himself. We *will*....

"Good bye, Ginny," he said softly.

She moved toward the opening. "Good bye, Harry," she whispered over her shoulder. Ginny turned and walked slowly through the archway, and as soon as she was through, the stones reappeared, and Harry found himself staring at a blank, grey stone wall.

Chapter Twelve

All Through The Night

After he'd kissed Ginny goodbye, Harry went from the caretaker's office directly to Slytherin House to see Jamie and Simon so they would know he was all right; Simon looked like he would rather have seen Stuart walk into the common room. But while she'd hugged the stuffing out of him, Jamie whispered to him that he'd been out of his head wondering what had happened to Harry, but as he was now out of his head over Stu, seeing Harry wasn't as comforting as it would be otherwise. Of course, Jamie cried over Ginny; she'd become very good friends with her, and she was still officially missing, and now her brother, too. Harry wished he could tell her the truth, but Dumbledore had said that no one else could know other than Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, after there had been a funeral.

"You know," she said, her head on Harry's shoulder as he held her, "if Draco and I didn't work out, and if Cho Chang didn't want to stay with him...I mean, Ron Weasley is rather dishy, and he seemed to fancy me..."

He laughed softly, then kissed her on the forehead. "Better not let Draco hear you talk that way." She smiled grimly; Harry ached for her, mourning two people who weren't really dead, and he couldn't tell her anything.

Harry had had to go see Professors McGonagall and Black, to somehow explain to them how he'd lost Ginny in the storm and accidentally walked into the changing rooms, spending the night there. They nodded and accepted his story; he was appropriately distraught over not having been able to get Ginny back to the castle. (When Ginny had returned to the Gryffindor common room and she and Ron got the owl from Dumbledore, they had left straightaway and she never got around to giving Madam Pomfrey's note to Sirius.) Harry didn't mention the creature in the lake to his godfather or the headmistress.

Later, he joined the other fifth, sixth and seventh years on the grounds, continuing the search for Ron and Ginny. It was frigid, and their breaths formed small white clouds before their mouths. He used his wand to clear snow out of the way, knowing that of course they would find no bodies. When he was near the edge of the lake, he was understandably apprehensive, but no tentacles came above the surface, grasping students and pulling them down into the dark depths. He slogged through the mud with Draco; he'd have preferred walking in snow; it was at least clean. Once they'd cleared a path, it quickly became a muddy mess.

He brandished his wand lazily at the ground near the lakeshore; the snow melted and the liquid sank into the magically-warmed ground, revealing a bag that appeared to be made of water weed, tatted in a complicated pattern, and containing a large dark object. His gift from the merpeople! He'd forgotten about it; it would have been unwieldy, at any rate, to carry it and Ginny through the blizzard. As soon as he was out of the lake, he'd

dropped it and forgotten it. He picked it up now and quickly stuffed it under his robes; Draco watched, brow furrowed.

"It's mine," he whispered to him, looking around for the other students and teachers who were searching. "It was a gift. From the merpeople."

"What is it?"

Harry shook his head. "Dunno," he said softly, trying to move his lips as little as possible. "I haven't had a chance to look at it. I'm going to take it back to the castle now; it's heavy. Cover for me."

Draco nodded; just then, Liam Quirke strode over to them, wearing fingerless gloves and tall green Wellingtons that made loud squelching noises in the mud. His brown hair stood up on his bare head, as though he'd been running his fingers through it in frustration. The Head Boy badge pinned to his cloak was spattered and soiled, as was the hem of his cloak; he had bags under his eyes and looked as though he hadn't slept.

"How are you two doing? Any sign of them yet? Cho's in a right state." Cho Chang was about thirty feet away, also clearing snow and slogging through the mud; the Head Girl's nose was red, but Harry didn't think it was from the cold. She sometimes looked like she was wiping tears from her face. Perhaps she really did care for Ron, he thought.

But now that Liam was standing right here, Harry bent over, holding his stomach (which allowed him to grasp the gift under his robes) and he puffed up his cheeks, hoping he looked ill, or like he was going to spew, or something. Draco quickly picked up on this, moving between him and the Head Boy.

"I think Harry's going to spew," Draco said to him. "I told him to go back to the castle, but he won't listen..."

"Potter!" Liam said authoritatively, drawing himself up; his tone of voice reminded Harry of Percy when he was Head Boy. "When a prefect tells you what to do, you do it! Is that understood?" Harry nodded, trying to look as sick and miserable as possible. "Good! Now off with you! Report to Madam Pomfrey immediately!"

Harry turned toward the castle, cradling the gift, trying not to go too fast in case Liam was still watching; but he didn't dare look over his shoulder and check. Once he was in the dungeons, he sprinted down the corridor to Slytherin house and his dorm room. He had just put the item from the merpeople in his trunk when Blaise Zabini entered the room, swaggering. He took in Harry's muddy shoes and the hem of his cloak; even the end of his scarf was muddy, from when he'd bent over to pick up the waterweed bag.

"Out with the other suckers looking for the stupid Gryffindors, Potter? Can't see why they didn't get back; *you* managed to. I guess that just goes to show: don't send a Gryffindor to do a Slytherin's job."

"Eat dung, Zabini," he said tiredly, locking the trunk and leaving. Damn! He'd have to wait until later to look at it, figure out what it was. If he took it out of the trunk again now, Zabini would be sure to ask about it.

Over the course of the weekend, the staff and students cleared the grounds of snow, turning the earth surrounding the castle into a messy quagmire. Although many students found scarves, hats, mittens, skates and even a lone boot that had been lost since the first snow in December, no sign of Ron or Ginny was found.

"Perhaps they wandered into the forest," Harry heard Sirius say uncertainly to Professor McGonagall on Sunday as they stood on the Quidditch pitch, surveying the muddy, dun-colored landscape before them. Harry thought his voice might be shaking because he was thinking of some of the creatures in the forest. Did it still have werewolves? he wondered. Perhaps the ministry had captured them all. He thought of Remus Lupin; *there* was a reason to change things back that his father hadn't mentioned. Perhaps James Potter's ghost didn't know about the werewolf camps, and it was possible that even if his mother and Sirius had talked to him, they would have withheld this information.

The search continued for a week; no one was able to concentrate very well in classes. Charlie confided to Harry and Draco that he almost wished Dumbledore *had* put a memory charm on him as he sometimes had a hard time remembering he was supposed to be distraught over his missing brother and sister, when he actually knew them to be quite safe and alive. He said some students seemed to think him a bit cold and devil-may-care for someone with two missing family members. He'd had to lie to his parents already, and finally convinced them that the clock at the Burrow must be broken; as long as the hands were still pointing to "mortal danger" for the three of them, instead of "At Work" for Charlie and "Dead" for Ron and Ginny (normally, their hands would have pointed at "At School") Mr. and Mrs. Weasley still held out hope that they'd be found.

Finally, Ron and Ginny were officially declared dead. An "expert" in magical creatures came from the Ministry and found some human bones in the Forbidden Forest and declared them to be Ginny's and Ron's. Harry suspected that they probably had something to do with Aragog, and were very likely quite old. Harry was *not* happy about this; if someone really *had* disappeared, is this what would happen? Would some pencil-pusher from the Ministry come up to the school to feed everyone propaganda and give easy answers?

The Ministry drone, however, gave everyone a needed closure. That night at dinner in the Great Hall, Professor McGonagall had them all stand and

raise their goblets to Ginny and Ron, the names rumbling through the hall coming from every corner except for the Slytherin table, where Harry, Draco, Jamie and Mariah were the only ones who stood and joined in the tribute (Harry could tell Mariah was trying to catch his eye, but he turned away). The funeral was to be on the following Saturday, which would mark a fortnight since Ron and Ginny had gone into hiding and also a fortnight since Stuart had been missing; Harry was asked to come to the funeral by Mrs. Weasley, but he knew he couldn't face her, he couldn't see her mourning and not tell her the truth. He declined, giving a different excuse. He said that since he'd been walking around in the same blizzard, he wished he had been the one lost, and he also wished that Ginny had found her way to the changing rooms as he had. She sent back a letter full of gratitude for him saving Ginny when she was struck by the car, and for finding Maggie. It hurt his stomach to read it; he couldn't wait for the funeral to be over so Mrs. Weasley would know the truth.

He moped around the castle for much of the day, even though it was a Hogsmeade weekend. If his parents hadn't managed to rent out the house again, he would have gone there, to mope in his own bedroom in his own home, but the new tenants were firmly ensconced until the middle of June, so that was out of the question. Draco finally found him on the front steps of the castle, staring down the Hogsmeade road, shivering in the cold.

"Harry," he said urgently, sitting down next to him. It was late afternoon, starting to get dark; the students who had gone to the village would be back soon. "My dad finally wrote back. I think you should read this." Draco handed him the parchment he'd been carrying and Harry read:

Lucius Malfoy
Malfoy Manor

*Mr. Draco Malfoy
Prefect
Slytherin House
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

Draco--

I have contacted the appropriate people and informed them of the contents of your earlier letter. Now that the Weasleys have held a funeral for their son and daughter, thus verifying the events you described to me, your mother has been returned to me. She is sun-burnt and almost completely dehydrated. She will be recuperating in St. Mungo's. I have been frantic this last fortnight while she has been gone. In future, do what you are told as soon as you are told. You cannot be

cavalier about these things and assume that no one will be hurt by your cowardice and laziness but you. We are lucky your mother is alive.

I hope you have your alibi in hand so that I do not have to come up to the school and defend you. I am very angry that you let this go so long and I certainly would not do a very convincing job of defending you just now.

--*Father*

Harry swallowed. "Your mum was taken? Why didn't he tell you?"

"Because he's Lucius Malfoy, *that's* why. I'm glad Mum's all right, though."

Harry agreed. Then he had a thought. "Draco--maybe that means Stuart will be returned!"

"But--Charlie's still--you know. And that note was addressed to Stuart's dad *and* brother."

Harry acknowledged this, but he hoped that Draco was wrong. They rose to go back into the castle; before he closed the door, Harry could see at a distance the throng of students starting to make their way back to the school. He stopped and stepped out onto the top step again, squinting in the dim twilight, trying to determine why the crowd of students looked strange.

They grew closer and closer, then someone broke away from the pack and ran toward the castle full tilt; Harry could see that the boy was an excellent runner, pumping his arms by his sides and keeping his chin up.

"Potter!" he cried when he was still about twenty feet away. Harry saw now that it was Rupert Longbottom. "Potter," he said again, more softly, when he was at the foot of the stairs; he bent over and talked into his knees, clearly winded, although Harry had been quite impressed by his running.

"He's back!" Rupert exclaimed to the ground. Harry frowned.

"Who?"

Rupert stood up, with difficulty. "Your missing brother! He was found in Honeydukes! They're bringing him!"

Now Harry understood why the procession of people looked so odd; there was a body levitating in their midst, and at least a half-dozen people had their wands trained on it to keep it aloft.

When they finally reached the castle, it seemed that everyone started talking at once; students he'd never met were speaking to him as if they knew him, describing how Stuart was found on the floor behind the candy counter, how odd it was that he looked as though he'd gotten some sun when he was normally so pale...

"Sun?" Harry said, alarmed. He pushed through the crowd so he could look at his brother; his skin looked awful, peeling and red, and Harry touched his lips lightly; they were dry as sand, parched and cracking. Harry remembered what Mr. Malfoy had written about his wife. *She is sun-burnt and almost completely dehydrated...* They must have done the same thing, whatever it was, to Stuart.

"I'll get your mum and dad!" Draco cried, and he was off.

"We have to get him to the hospital wing right away!" Harry told the others in a panic. The crowd that had been levitating Stuart continued to do so, and Harry opened the door to the infirmary so they could take him inside.

Madam Pomfrey blanched when she saw him, and shooed everyone out of the infirmary except for Stuart's family. Harry stood with his arm around Jamie's shoulder while she twisted her robes in her fingers; Simon sat by his twin's bedside, looking grim, and their mother sat on Stuart's other side, holding his hand gently, to avoid touching the sunburn. Their dad talked in low tones to Madam Pomfrey, about potions, it seemed, and Harry never thought time moved more slowly than during the vigil in that infirmary. He could see from the statement on Madam Pomfrey's face and his dad's face the reason why they were all here: they were waiting for his brother to die.

Stuart's raspy breathing seemed to fill the room as hours stretched into days; no one seemed to expect Harry, Jamie and Simon to attend classes, and Harry didn't question what was being done about the Potions and Dark Arts classes his parents were supposed to teach. He heard Madam Pomfrey speaking quietly to his mother on the third day.

"All of his organs are shutting down."

"Maybe--maybe a Muggle hospital--"

"They would tell you the same thing. They would just hook him up to horrible machines that would do nothing to cure him, just do his breathing for him and keep him in pain. He's not a candidate for a transplant in his condition. It's just a matter of time now, my dear..."

Madam Pomfrey put a sympathetic hand on his mother's arm. His mother backed up a step, as if it burned her to be touched by the older woman. Stuart had only been able to speak a little; most of what they learned was

from a letter Mrs. Malfoy sent that she dictated to someone on the staff at St. Mungo's. She said that she and Stuart had been together, in a desert. They didn't know how they'd gotten there. They had some food and water when they started, but eventually the supplies had dwindled down to nothing. They'd been without food for four days and without water for two when they mysteriously found themselves back in Malfoy Manor (Mrs. Malfoy) and in the Honeydukes sweetshop (Stuart). When he managed to croak out some words, Stuart said that Draco's mother had taken good care of him, but Mrs. Malfoy's letter expressed her frustration about their situation; there was only so much that could be done when the sun was so relentless and their supplies were so few....

Harry was curled in a ball on one of the infirmary beds on the last night. Jamie was lying on the bed next to his, still in her robes, looking like a princess waiting to be awakened by a kiss from her prince. Simon had fallen asleep slumped against Stuart's bed. Harry didn't know where his dad was, but his mother was still sitting on the other side of Stuart's bed, holding his hand. Stuart looked odd and waxy to Harry.

And then--she started singing. He hadn't heard her sing for ages, it seemed, and he hadn't heard her sing this since the twins were very small. Her voice echoed off the hard surfaces in the infirmary, clear as a bell. He couldn't stop the tears rolling down his face, but he made no move to dry them so she wouldn't know he was awake. He listened to her sing to her youngest child, tears streaming down her own cheeks....

*Sleep my child and peace attend thee,
All through the night
Guardian angels God will send thee,
All through the night
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,
Hill and dale in slumber sleeping
I my loved one's watch am keeping,
All through the night.*

*Angels watching, e'er around thee,
All through the night
Midnight slumber close surround thee,
All through the night
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping
Hill and dale in slumber sleeping
I my loved one's watch am keeping,
All through the night.*

Then she switched to Welsh, to the lullaby the boy soprano had sung at Dudley's funeral, and finally she sang the same song in English, and Harry could more clearly hear the tears in her voice, the way she choked her way through the song...

*Sleep, my baby, on my bosom,
Warm and cozy, it will prove,
Round thee mother's arms are folding,
In her heart a mother's love.
There shall no one come to harm thee,
Naught shall ever break thy rest;
Sleep, my darling babe, in quiet,
Sleep on mother's gentle breast.*

*Sleep serenely, baby, slumber,
Lovely baby, gently sleep;
Tell me wherefore art thou smiling,
Smiling sweetly in thy sleep?
Do the angels smile in heaven
When thy happy smile they see?
Dost thou on them smile while slumb'ring
On my....*

She stopped, unable to go on; Harry waited for the last words, but they never came. She put her head down on the bed at last and let go, let her grief roll out of her, the sobs wrenching Harry's heart, and he knew that his brother was dead.

Their vigil was over.

He longed to go to her, to try to comfort her, but he remained where he was, letting her weeping continue unabated; he had a feeling she needed to do this on her own, to not have to think about someone else either comforting her or needing comfort.

He was uncertain how long his mother cried; at length, when she seemed to have quieted, Harry heard Simon stirring. "Mum?" he whispered.

He saw his mother wipe her face of tears. "Yes, Simon?"

"Why--why is Stu so--cold?"

She looked at her son, only twelve years old, and swallowed. "He's--he's gone, Simon. Our Stu is gone," she said softly.

Harry wondered what Simon was thinking. He stared at his dead brother, so like him. Harry slowly sat up and his mother looked at him. He nodded at her and she nodded back, then he gently shook Jamie's shoulder. Her eyes fluttered open, and Harry wondered whether she'd really been asleep or listening to their mother's singing and then her keening, as she mourned her baby. He nodded to her now, as he had with his mother, and without a word, she put her arms around his waist and buried her head on his chest; he held his sister, feeling her tears wet his shirt as his glided

down her dark, shining hair, and he knew that their family would never again be the same.

* * * * *

Harry had imagined many things about having a family, in his other life; he'd pictured his parents being able to raise him, he'd wondered what it would be like to have siblings. Something he'd never imagined was what it would be like to bury a little brother.

They stepped carefully over the hard ruts in the graveyard as they walked across a cold, bleak and barren landscape to the Snape family mausoleum. They'd had the service in the Presbyterian Church in Dunoon, which had surprised Harry; but his mother had thought going to St. David's Presbyterian Church in Godric's Hollow where she'd been married the first time would be inappropriate, as Stuart was Severus Snape's son, not James Potter's. (Harry also wasn't sure that there *wasn't* a Presbyterian church in Wales *not* named "St. David's.") The church where they had the service was the same one Sirius had told him about, the one in which the "special gentlemen" of the Clan Lamont had hidden, who were later hanged from the trees around the church by the men of Clan Campbell.

Oddly enough, this day, his stepfather and Uncle Duncan chose to wear their Campbell kilts; his dad bought him a MacGregor kilt, since his mother said that was the correct one for James' family, because of her erstwhile mother-in-law, Elspeth King. Harry shivered; this was *not* kilt weather, as far as he was concerned. Sirius was in Clan Lamont; he had walked up to Severus Snape and grasped his hand solemnly, putting his left hand on his elbow at the same time. Harry's stepfather clearly squeezed Sirius' hand back, and nodded at him; today, all other issues were irrelevant. He was mourning his son.

Harry couldn't remember the service in the grim church; it was simpler and more abrupt, it seemed to him, than Dudley's service had been. How odd, he thought, that my parents don't usually seem to be very religious people, and yet this is something they have in common, this stern, Calvinistic church.

The coffin was far too light, it seemed to Harry. He wanted to feel like it was pushing him into the ground; instead he was afraid it would float away. It rested insubstantially on his shoulder as he walked behind Draco and Simon, who was at the front; on the other side of the coffin were the men, his dad, Sirius, and Uncle Duncan. Draco and Simon wore Campbell kilts also. They walked solemnly to the mausoleum while the pipes behind them played *Amazing Grace*, making Harry's eyes sting.

He tuned out the service in the graveyard as he had the one in the church; no amount of words could make up for the death of a twelve-

year-old boy, he thought. No one could say anything that would make it all right for Simon to go through life without his twin....

Finally, Jamie, wearing the MacGregor tartan across her black cloak fastened with a brooch at her shoulder, stepped forward and sang with his mother's voice:

*God, that madest earth and heaven,
Darkness and light;
Who the day for toil hast given,
For rest the night;
May Thine angel guards defend us,
Slumber sweet Thy mercy send us;
Holy dreams and hopes attend us,
This livelong night.*

She sang to the same tune as [*All Through The Night*](#), the first lullaby Harry had heard his mother sing on the night Stuart had died. She continued singing, and Harry marveled how her voice grew stronger, rather than fading; he hadn't been able to get anything to come out of his voicebox in the church, neither spoken words nor sung ones. Then something in the second verse she sang caught his attention....

*...From the power of evil hide us,
In the narrow pathway guide us...*

Nothing had been able to hide Stuart from the power of evil. It wouldn't have mattered whether he followed a "narrow pathway" or not; he would still be dead, Harry thought irritably.

*Guard us waking, guard us sleeping
And when we die,
May we in Thy mighty keeping
All peaceful lie;
When the last dread call shall wake us,
Do not Thou, our God forsake us,
But to reign in glory take us
With Thee on high.*

They carried the coffin into the mausoleum; they were shown what shelf to use. Harry saw plaques saying, *Sallustius Snape and Patricia MacDermid Snape*, both dying in 1974. *Dad's parents*, he realized. Doing the math quickly, he realized that his stepfather had only been fourteen when his parents had died. That was only a few years into the reign of terror of Voldemort. How had they died? he wondered. *After that, he went to Uncle Duncan during summer holidays, Harry remembered.*

After they left the cemetery, they gathered at Uncle Duncan's flat above his apothecary shop. The service had only been family, save for Sirius,

Draco and the minister, whom Harry discovered at the wake was actually a wizard. His name was Gareth Lyon. Harry noticed he had a Clan Lamont crest pinned to his jacket when he was out of his vestments. He still wore his dog-collar, though. Perhaps Lamonts and Campbells were getting along better these days, he thought.

Uncle Duncan passed some butterbeer to Mr. Lyon, who had a milder lilt to his voice than Duncan; Harry had looked puzzled at the revelation that he was a wizard, so he explained.

"The entire congregation is actually wizarding. We occasionally gait some Muggles tryin' to coom in, but what with the charms on the front gates, they immediately become convinced they want Westminster Praysbyterian, a few blocks away...."

"The high point o' the yair," Duncan told Harry, "is Reconciliation Day. The day when all o' the Campbells speak the ritual wairds of apology to all of the Lamonts. I'm not sure there's a single witch or wizard in Dunoon 'oo isn't one or t'other. Some are both in fact, and switch off sides from yair to yair."

"'Scuse me," Mr. Lyon said, following Sirius to the table with the food, talking loudly to him.

"Reconciliation," Harry said softly to Uncle Duncan. "That sounds nice."

Duncan shook his head. "'Tisn't always. Aye, mostly, 'tis. Some yairs ye get some old coot screamin' aboot how the Lamonts all desairved it, fer lettin' the Muggles take over their Clan. But in recent yairs...wail, ye see, advairstry unites people. And if ye go scraimin' aboot Muggles...wail, it don't look good. Now, I was Ravenclaw in school, and so was me sister, Patricia. But she married a Slytherin, so people *will* make assumptions." He sighed and shook his head sadly. "Assumptions like that is what killt'er."

Harry asked him slowly and softly, so only Duncan could hear, "What sort of assumptions?"

Duncan looked over to his nephew cautiously, his jaw clenched. It seemed to Harry that in his old life, Duncan McDermid, when Snape used Polyjuice Potion to impersonate him, did *not* have quite so much grey in his hair.

"Those Aurors 'oo killed yer stepdad's mum 'n' dad, o' course. They were in the wrong place at t'wrong time. Too near a Death Eater attack, and him being in Slytherin when he was in school...wail, the Aurors in quaistion wair a husband-wife team, knew of Sallustius Snape; they wair in the same Hogwarts yair, started in '51. Didn't trust'im as far as they could throw'im, just 'cause o' his hoose. He was a good man my Patty married; I would'n've stood fer it otherwise. Our own parents died fightin'

Grindelwald by Albus Dumbledore's side; Patty was only five when they died. We went to live with our Gran. I was ten, and started Hogwarts the year after. That was a golden time; knowin' that Grindelwald would trouble Europe no more, and Dumbledore was made the headmaster after that, too. But those Longbottoms didn't care that Patty and I were orphaned by Grindelwald; they cut down her and Sallustius as if they was vermin contaminatin' the airth....Witnesses said so, but it didn't matter. The Aurors was 'just doin' thair job.'"

"What?" Harry breathed, after he took care to swallow his own butterbeer.
"Longbottoms?"

Duncan snorted. "Supposed to be some o' the greatest Aurors aiver. Aye; ef I waint aroond hexin' ever'thin' that moved sometimes I'd be hittin' someone that desairved it too. Helluva way to operate..."

Harry gazed at his stepfather, at the man orphaned by Aurors, the man who had faced down those very same Aurors in his own front hall when they came for Remus Lupin; the Longbottoms still clearly thought all Snapes were immediately suspect. He shivered, remembering the first time he'd faced his own parents' killer, when he discovered that Voldemort was sharing a body with Professor Quirrell...of course, he'd also seen him in the Forbidden Forest, drinking unicorn's blood, but he didn't know that's who he was seeing at the time. Not for sure, at any rate.

And in his other life, Harry remembered, Severus Snape had had to teach Neville Longbottom. For four long years, day in and day out, he had done everything in his power to make Neville's life a living hell. Now Harry knew why. It hadn't finally faded until Neville began to show a dedication to really mastering potions, and Harry remembered the way Snape had taken over in the infirmary when Neville was first brought in, suffering withdrawal symptoms...Perhaps he'd finally seen what a grudge could do, that a boy who had no knowledge of any wrongdoing on his parents' part could die if he didn't step in and choose to put the past to rest. Harry had also wondered before whether Severus Snape felt some guilt from having recruited Barty Crouch, Jr.--one of the Longbottoms' tormentors--to be a Death Eater. Harry didn't have Dark Arts with the Gryffindors, so he didn't know how his stepfather was around the Neville Longbottom in this life, nor Neville's brothers.

"Course that was why he made yer mum wait b'fore he'd tell her waither he'd marry her."

Harry squinted at him, his mind having wandered. "Excuse me?"

"Wail, yer mum and you went ter visit Severus at the castle, and while ye were there, the bairn decided to come. Yer sister, ye understand. He helped with the midwifin'. Afterward, she asked him to marry her. He said maybe; the next day he said he'd marry her on one condition: if they was

to wed, she could no longer be an Auror. She agreed, and the raist, as they say, is history."

She asked *him* to marry her. And he'd made her give up being an Auror. That made sense. But there was still one thing he didn't understand.

"Why didn't they get married at the church here in Dunoon?"

"Wail, I'm not clair aboot that exac'ly. Seemed it had somethin' to do with her fairst weddin'; too sim'lar, too many mem'ries." Then his voice dropped. "But I also thought she thought it wouldn't be right 'cause she was already expectin' yer little brothers. They wasn't going to get married until almost a year later; that kind of sped things up."

Harry nodded, looking down into his mug of butterbeer. He didn't profess to really understand his parents' relationship, but now at least he knew more about his dad's background. His parents were killed by the Longbottoms.

That explained an awful lot.

* * * * *

They went back to Hogsmeade from Uncle Duncan's by Floo, having made arrangements with their tenants to land in the drawing room at Hog's End. No one seemed to be around, although Harry noted that the tenants had rearranged the furniture a little bit. They went through the front hall and out to the drive, finding the horseless carriages Professor McGonagall had sent waiting for them there. Their parents rode in one carriage with Simon, while Jamie, Draco and Harry rode in the other with Sirius. Harry pointedly sat with Jamie on one side, forcing Draco to sit next to Sirius.

Harry wanted to speak to his godfather as he used to, easily and unguarded, but somehow it seemed those days were over. *I'm in a little need of reconciliation myself*, he thought. It seemed that his parents had been leaning on each other quite a bit while Stuart had been missing and then after he died. Would *their* reconciliation be permanent? He had no idea.

Sirius looked uncomfortable as well, and tried to engage Jamie in conversation, but she was too distraught, leaning her head on Harry's shoulder and keeping her handkerchief in her hand, as she needed it often. Harry wished again that she could know about Ron and Ginny--she had had so many occasions to cry lately--but that was out of the question. So he asked her something designed to cheer her up.

"Jamie--Your birthday's coming up. What do you want?"

She sat up and considered it for a moment. "I would like...for my brother to actually *remember* my birthday."

"What do you mean? I always remember your birthday."

"Yes and no. You always remember to give me something, but every year you think my birthday is February 21. You give me my gift, and then it's over, and when my actual birthday comes *four days later*, it all feels like an anticlimax...."

Harry grimaced. "Sorry, James. Don't know what's wrong with me."

She shrugged. "At least you're consistent. Every year you get it wrong the same way."

He smiled at her and she put her head on his shoulder again. "Well, like you said, I'm at least consistent, right?"

She nodded, smiling sadly. "Right."

She put her head back down and closed her eyes; Harry put his arm around her and let her rest on his shoulder. Draco looked miffed, as though *he* had wanted to comfort her. Harry met Sirius' eyes, and nodded. *I forgive you*, he thought, willing Sirius to understand. He could be as big as his dad. This was no time for grudges, for fighting amongst themselves.

When they were back at the castle, Simon went up to

the staff wing with their parents; he was going to be living with them until further notice. Harry wondered whether Jamie should also live with their parents, but as she didn't say anything, neither did he. Still, he worried; it had been entirely too easy for someone to come into the Slytherin dorms and take Stuart; although he wasn't as sick as Stuart had been, a week in the desert would not do Simon any good. Nor Jamie.

Jamie accompanied Harry and Draco back to the dungeons and Slytherin House, and they all went to the sixth year boys' dorm, dragging their feet listlessly. Finally, after almost twenty minutes of sitting around staring at each other, Harry decided that since Zabini and Nott weren't there, he should finally take out the gift from the merpeople and see what they'd given him. He still hadn't had an opportunity.

Harry picked up the amazingly strong woven bag from inside his trunk and put it gently on the floor, then knelt next to it, slowly peeling the bag back from the object inside. Jamie came and knelt next to him.

"Where did you get it?" she asked him, sniffing and then wiping her nose on her handkerchief. For some reason, she was whispering.

"The merpeople gave it to me," he whispered back.

It appeared to be a large, smooth opaque stone, black as night; but then Harry noticed the tiny hinges on one side, and he realized that it was a box of some kind. He looked all around and shook it, but he could see no keyhole. He took out his wand as Draco noticed what he was doing and came over.

His best friend stared at it. "What is it?"

Harry shook his head. "Dunno. I think it's a box. I'm going to try to open it. Since it's from the merpeople, it might screech or something. Get ready to hold your ears."

Draco frowned. "Why do you think it'll screech?"

"Well--that's if it's been enchanted to speak Mermish. Mermish just sounds like screeching and wailing when you're on land. You have to listen to it with your head underwater to understand it."

"How do you know?" Jamie asked.

There was that question again; ever since September, over and over: *How do you know?*

"Nevermind. Let me start with something simple." He pointed his wand at the stone and said, "*Alohomora!*"

Nothing happened. "That's not an all-purpose unlocking charm, you know," Draco said disdainfully. "It's for doors. The 'mora' part means 'wall.' It's like asking a wall to open."

Harry grimaced. "I knew that." He hadn't. "I just thought it would be worth a try anyway. Let me think." Not for the first time since September, he wished he had Hermione by his side to help him figure something out--the Hermione from his old life. He sat for what seemed a long time staring at the end of his wand, trying to think of something, but nothing came into his head except the incantation for making hidden writing appear, *Apparecium*.

Jamie was looking bored. "Oh, come on Harry. Let's do *something*." She took out her own wand and pointed it at the thing, saying, "*Aperiro cistum.*"

Slowly, a crack appeared around the middle of the smooth, obsidian-like stone; it moved in a sure, straight line like a cut by a stoneworker using a diamond-tipped blade. Harry reached out and pried his fingers into the fine crack, bracing himself for the noise he'd heard when he'd opened the golden egg which had contained the clue for the second task of the

Triwizard Tournament. He'd finally succeeded in getting his fingernails into it, but the hinges resisted every millimeter of the way, and it seemed to take forever, but finally, the strange box was open, and the room was still utterly quiet. The three of them put their heads close together, peering inside, holding their breaths.

There was just one object to be seen: an amulet with no chain. It lay in a small depression in the bottom half of the box, and Harry saw that there was a mirror-image depression in the lid of the box, as though the strange stone were actually a mold for a metal-smith, and the molten metal of which the pendant was made had been poured into the depression, then the box closed and sealed, so that they were the first sentient beings ever to see the result.

Gingerly, Harry reached out and picked up the amulet, which was silver-colored metal in the shape of a basilisk. There was even a small green stone that had been incorporated into the metal when it was still molten, perfectly positioned to serve as one of the eyes of the creature in profile. In fact, if Harry didn't know better, he'd say it was the exact same basilisk amulet that Ginny had given him for a fifteenth birthday gift in his other life. Maybe it *was* the same one. It could have been created ages ago. He hefted it in his hand; it had the same weight, the same warmth in his grasp, and as he held it, an image leapt into his head of Ginny, despondent, sitting under a high window, gazing at the sky longingly. She seemed real enough for him to reach out and touch her.... He opened his hand and looked down at the pendant, brow furrowed. He always thought before that holding the amulet made him think of Ginny because she had given it to him; but in this life, it came from the merpeople, so there was clearly more to it than just thinking of the gift-giver.

"Oh, isn't it pretty!" Jamie exclaimed, leaning over it. "I have just the thing to go with it."

She scrambled to her feet and dashed from the room, looking much more lively now, returning in a few minutes with a glittering silver chain. She handed it to Harry, who threaded the chain through the loop at the top of the amulet; he put it around his neck, looking down at it, then wrapped his hand around it again, feeling it grow warm in his grasp.

"Hey!" Jamie said, sounding disappointed. "I thought you might let me have it. After all, it's perfect Slytherin colors: silver and green. And it's a snake."

"No it's not," Harry said quickly. "It's the king of snakes: a basilisk."

"How do you know?" Draco said.

"What are you, a broken record?" Harry groaned at him, even though it was Jamie who had asked before. Jamie and Draco both looked at each other, perplexed.

"What's a broken record?" they said together. Harry rolled his eyes; there he went again, spouting Muggle expressions from his old life. He felt certain he'd heard his mother use the same expression; didn't Jamie pay attention?

"Never mind," he said, his old fallback. He hoped that when the Muggle-born students started coming to the school again Professor McGonagall would also put Muggle Studies back on the curriculum.

"Sorry, James, but the merpeople gave it to me. Thanks for the chain, though."

She crossed her arms, looking grumpy. "You're welcome," she grumbled, sounding like he was anything but. He looked down at the amulet, resting on his sternum. Then suddenly, an idea lit up his brain; he stared harder at the amulet, thinking, *Basilisk. Ginny. Basilisk. Ginny.* for some reason he felt sure that he was close to a solution, to a way for fixing the timelines. *Voldemort will never agree*, he thought. Then, *Maybe he doesn't have to*.

He looked at Draco and then he had it; he knew how it could be done! It could work, it really could; he felt sure of it! Yet--he looked up at his sister and best friend. He would need for someone else to sacrifice themselves. It was suicide. He could only imagine someone who cared a great deal about him doing such a selfless thing. And yet--how could he ever ask someone he cared about to do such a thing? Harry looked down at the amulet again, feeling the solution slipping through his fingers....

Zabini entered the room, and Harry quickly thrust the amulet inside his shirt. The other boy looked at the waterweed bag and the open stone mold; his eyes were narrowed. "What's going on here, then?"

Harry closed the stone and put it back into the bag, then put it back into his trunk, locking it securely. "None of your business, Zabini." Again, Harry wished he had some idea of what his dormmates' parents looked like, so he knew whether he'd seen them in the circle of Death Eaters. That was another advantage to taking the Hogwarts Express to school; you were able to get a look at other students' parents seeing them off. If Zabini's parents had ever been among the guests at the Malfoys' parties over the years, they hadn't brought their son with them, and Harry never heard their names connected to their faces.

Harry herded his sister and friend out of the dorm and into the common room, glancing over his shoulder at Zabini, who, disturbingly, met his gaze. He reached into his shirt as he walked, holding the amulet again,

letting the peace flow into his body from his grasping hand, letting it quiet his mind....

* * * * *

For the rest of that weekend, everything moved in a fog for Harry; when classes began again on Monday morning, he felt as though he'd been asleep for a long time, in a fevered stupor. Now he was awake again, and everything looked somehow clearer and cleaner at the edges, like the difference between looking at the world with and without his glasses.

His first class was Transfiguration, and he did his best to treat Sirius the same as he had before the day he'd seen his godfather and mother together in the guest room at Hog's End, remembering the way his stepfather had accepted him during Stuart's funeral. But when Harry was on his way to Dark Arts, walking alongside Draco, behind the other Slytherins, a hand suddenly pulled him into an open classroom doorway.

"Wha--?" Harry started to say, but almost immediately, he lost the power of speech as a large hand grasped him by the throat and pushed him up against a wall. Harry plucked at the fingers closing so tightly around his windpipe, wheezing, to no avail. He stared at his attacker, eyes starting to bulge from lack of air, but then the grip was relaxed slightly, so he was held in place, but could still breathe.

He put his face close to Harry's then, hissing between his teeth. "Too bad you didn't kill me when you had the chance, Potter, because now *I* am going to kill *you*."

Ron Weasley looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him. He tried to swallow; it was rather difficult. "Weasley," he whispered, "you're not supposed to be out! What are you thinking?"

Ron brought his face even closer. "Didn't you hear me? I'm thinking that I'm about to kill you," he said evenly, his jaw clenched.

"What--what did *I* do?"

And then, a split second later, Harry knew; he knew for sure, and when Ron spoke the words, it merely confirmed his fears.

"You knocked up my sister!"

Harry pictured Ginny sitting near the high window again, gazing at the sky; he realized now that her hand was resting on her belly, still flat and undistended, but she already had this protective instinct....

A child...

"I--I don't know what to say--"

"Oh, there you are Harry--bloody hell!" Draco exclaimed, seeing what was going on as he entered the otherwise deserted classroom. He held the door open with his hand on the knob, his rucksack falling to the floor. "Get your hands off him, Weasley! What the hell are you doing here? Are you trying to blow everything?"

Ron didn't change his physical position one iota. "I'm too busy killing the sodding bastard who knocked up my sister to care about that, Malfoy."

Draco's jaw dropped. "Knocked up? You're kidding! From *one time*?"

Harry threw Draco an irritated glance. "What are you, jealous or something? Would you like to be over here with a lunatic's hand around *your* throat? Aaah!" he screamed as Ron tightened his grip again. Draco strode over to the two of them and pulled Ron's hand from Harry with a great deal of difficulty. There was a bit of a tussle and some yelling, then a shocked exclamation from someone standing in the doorway.

"Hullo! What's going on--*Ron Weasley*?"

The three of them stared into the face of their History of Magic teacher, Professor Binns. *No no no no no*, Harry thought. *Not him, of all people...*

He had no choice; he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the corpulent man, saying, "*Impedimenta!*" Immediately, Binns appeared to be frozen. "Watch the door from the corridor!" he barked at Draco. Then Harry turned to Ron, speaking quickly. "How did you get out? You've got to go back; this is too risky. I'll ask Dum--I mean, Davy if I can come visit the two of you later. We'll talk about this rationally," he said, his voice shaking as he felt anything but rational. Ron backed up, rubbing his arm (Draco had twisted the skin there painfully).

"There's nothing to talk about. Ginny's going to have a baby; *your* stinking, rotten baby, so you're going to *die*..."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure? She's spewing every morning like clockwork. And eating everything in sight the rest of the time. And sleeping when she's not eating. Plus she said that she's, um, 'late.' You've got a sister; surely you have to deal with her being moody once a month. *You* know. I'm sure because *she's* sure, you bast--" Ron pulled out his wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry cried. Ron was only two feet from the wall, so he didn't travel far backward, but his wand flew through the air and into Harry's grasp. When he was holding it firmly, he went on. "Will you listen to me? You have to go back into hiding; if you're seen--"

"Then another one of your stupid brothers will die!" Ron exclaimed, as though he enjoyed the idea. Harry stared at him, incredulous.

"I can't believe you just said that, Weasley," Harry muttered to him, and now he felt that he *could* actually kill Ron, with no remorse whatsoever. "I just carried my little brother's coffin into a mausoleum because *I* refused to kill *you* and my *dad* refused to kill your *brother*."

"And because of that I'm not supposed to care that you've gotten Ginny pregnant?"

"Try caring about *this*," he said, seething and pointing at the nearly-frozen Professor Binns. "Binns is a Death Eater. That's right; a Death Eater. Now he's seen you and knows you're alive. Maybe it won't be Simon who's next, if they try something else to convince me to kill you. Maybe it will be my sister Jamie, did that ever occur to you? Or maybe we don't have to worry about that, because I'm feeling very much like I *could* kill you right now with *no problem!*"

Ron looked back and forth between Harry and Binns, swallowing. "All right, all right," he said weakly. "I'm going back. Wait for me to be gone before you take the spell off him. What will you tell him?"

"I dunno; I'll think of something. Get out of here!" But a moment later, he cried, "Wait!" Ron stopped, a puzzled look on his face. "Here's your wand. And Weasley--it was, um, I mean--we were in pretty extreme circumstances. Ginny and I. It wasn't like I had any control over the weather....Anyway," he went on, squirming a little, "how have you and, um, Cho avoided this problem?"

Now it was Ron who seemed to squirm a bit. "She bought some Muggle stuff," he mumbled indistinctly. "At a chemist's near her house."

"Ah."

Ron turned from him again and walked to the opposite end of the classroom, and Harry saw now that it looked as though the wall had been opened there; part of it pivoted, and Ron put his shoulder to this now, pushing it closed again when he was in the secret passage. Harry went to it and experimented with *Alohomora*, and general pushing and shoving, but it seemed fairly secure; apparently it could only be opened from the other side, even with magic. Harry strode out into the corridor to speak with Draco.

"Go to Dark Arts. I'll be right there."

Draco nodded again; Harry didn't know whether he heard Harry's comment about Jamie being at risk. He was probably, at the very least, worried about his mother, who was still in St. Mungo's.

What the hell can I do? Harry wondered whether Binns really believed he'd seen Ron. Maybe I can make him doubt what he saw....

Harry walked down the corridor toward Dark Arts; when he'd gone as far as he could go and still see Binns' back in the doorway of the empty classroom, he aimed his wand at Binns, taking the spell off him, then ducked behind a suit of armor. He peered down the corridor, looking under the suit's outstretched arm. He saw Binns walk into the classroom, then back out into the corridor, looking back and forth. "*I know what I saw,*" he heard the professor say clearly, before striding off in the opposite direction.

Harry turned and fled toward the dark Arts classroom, finding it difficult to skid to a stop when he'd reached it, he was going so fast. He motioned to his dad through the glass window in the door, panting.

Professor Snape strode to the door, looking stern and irritated. When he'd opened the door, Harry pulled him into the corridor and whispered in his ear, telling him what had happened with Binns, and the fact the he'd seen Binns at the initiation. His dad shook his head.

"I don't know who all the Death Eaters are, but I do know the operatives, and Binns isn't one of them."

"Are Bill and Percy Weasley operatives?" His dad nodded. "What about Niamh Quirke and Roger Davies?"

His dad looked mystified. "Roger Davies isn't an operative..."

Harry had a lump in his throat; that meant Cedric was the other young operative. Roger was a genuine Death Eater, and he was the father of Katie Bell's baby! And he was going to be Sam Bell's son-in-law...

Harry wished he'd said something sooner about seeing Roger Davies and Binns. "Binns must be who Dumbl--er, Davy was talking about, here at the school."

"Right," his stepfather muttered, lost in thought. Harry hadn't told his dad the reason why Ron had been seeking him out. His stepfather was silent for a long moment after Harry stopped whispering, then he started talking quietly and very fast.

"I'll let you and Draco go early when class is almost over. I want you to get to Simon's class before it's over, and Draco can do the same with Jamie." Harry noticed that his dad seemed to be more accepting of Draco and Jamie as a couple if it meant that Draco could be counted upon to protect her. "Each of you make sure you escort Simon and Jamie to the Great Hall safely for lunch. After lunch, walk each of them to their classes. I'll dismiss my first afternoon class early and go get Jamie out of her class

slightly early, then Simon. I'll take them to their second afternoon classes. Your mother can do the same in her second afternoon class and take them to the staff wing after that--"

"Jamie too? Not Slytherin House?"

"No, I think not. I know Binns has access to the staff wing, but Charlie Weasley and Sirius Black are there too. And your mother and I. Someone managed to spirit Stuart out of his dorm, but I'll be damned if anyone is going to touch Jamie or Simon with the four of us at hand, and Davy besides."

"And tomorrow?"

He sighed. "Between Davy, your mother and I, Charlie, Black and perhaps also Minerva, we'll be able to make sure they get to and from every class and meal safely. And the official story about Jamie also staying in the staff wing will be--trauma. Yes, trauma. Since her brother's death."

"In that case, perhaps I should start sleeping upstairs, too. And I'll be one more person someone would have to get past if they wanted to harm Jamie or Simon. I can just kip on the couch in the sitting room."

His stepfather nodded. "All right. But now you should get into your seat, since I'm going to be sending you and Draco out early. And we need to find a time to discuss all this with Alb--I mean, Davy."

Harry nodded and followed his dad into the classroom when he opened the door. The Hufflepuffs and the other Slytherins looked at Harry, puzzled, as he took his place. Professor Snape strode to the lectern and shuffled through his notes, looking even paler than usual, and cleared his throat.

"Before we go on, that will be five points from Slytherin, Malfoy, for being late, and ten points from Slytherin, Potter, for being even later. Now, where were we before we were interrupted?"

Blaise Zabini raised his hand, looking smug, and Harry's dad called on him. Harry felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck when he met Zabini's gaze. He didn't hear what Zabini said to his dad. Was he perhaps an *unofficial* Death Eater? Harry remembered that when Lucius Malfoy had recruited his stepfather to "cultivate" Barty Crouch, Jr., he didn't receive the dark Mark right away, nor had he gone to Death Eater meetings. Could Zabini, still in his sixth year, be doing something similar? Maybe it wasn't Binns who'd spirited Stuart away; maybe it was this boy who slept in the *same room* as Harry.

Harry spent the rest of the class watching Zabini, trying to figure him out, and wound up feeling rather stupid, for every time his stepfather asked

him anything, he had to answer, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. Could you repeat the question?" He had soon lost Slytherin another fifteen points.

When there were ten minutes to go before lunch, Harry's dad said, "Potter, Malfoy. Please come here." Draco looked confused, but Harry nodded at him, and he stopped looking questioning. "Since the two of you seem to think you don't need this class, I assume that means you are free to deliver some notes for me. Take these to the people whose names are on the front."

He handed Harry a piece of parchment saying *Simon Snape*, and Draco's said *Jamie Potter*. Draco looked puzzled again, but Harry hustled him out of the classroom and explained to him in the corridor. Draco immediately nodded with understanding and took off at a run. (Harry knew he knew Jamie's schedule by heart.)

Thus began the complicated matter of escorting Jamie and Simon everywhere. For the rest of that Monday and all the next day--which was Jamie's fifteenth birthday--Simon and Jamie were accompanied wherever they went in the castle. In Herbology on Tuesday morning, Harry was aching from sleeping on the hard little couch in his parents' sitting room. (But he was pleased to see that his dad magically divided the bed in the second bedroom into two beds, positioned on opposite sides of the room, for Jamie and Simon, and his mother slept in the same room with her husband.)

After Herbology, Harry and Draco had History of Magic with the Hufflepuffs. Harry felt a coldness come over him before he entered the classroom; it was as though an ice-cold knife pierced his chest whenever the Death Eater professor looked at him. But Binns never said a word about the incident he'd witnessed the previous day; he looked significantly at Harry and Draco repeatedly, but he never said a word that even remotely implied that he remembered seeing Ron. He dismissed the class early for lunch, looking entirely too cheerful, Harry thought, for that to be a good thing.

Then, at lunch, they were able to stop waiting for the other shoe to fall. Unusual at lunch (owl post was normally during breakfast), an owl came sweeping into the Great Hall, the ceiling enchanted to look like the grey winter sky outdoors, darker grey clouds scudding across the dreary expanse. The owl landed on Harry's shoulder, and he froze; Draco reached up to remove the letter from the bird's leg, and Harry winced as the bird dug its claws into his shoulder before taking off again.

Ignoring stares from others at the Slytherin table who were wondering why Harry had received an owl in the middle of the day, Harry and Draco leaned over the letter together.

Dear Mr. Potter,

*It has come to our attention that a certain person may possibly still be among the living. Inasmuch as you may have made an honest mistake in thinking he was not, now that you are no longer under that mistaken impression, we trust that you will rectify the matter immediately. To avoid any confusion this time, we must insist upon **habeus corpus**. You may or may not know that that is a term that means roughly **show us the body**.*

You know what you must do and how you must prove that you have done it. Do not take too long. You know why.

The letter was unsigned. Damn! Harry thought. How the hell are we going to get around this one? *Habeus corpus*. Show us the body. *The body*. There had to be a body or he wouldn't be believed. But if there was a body, wouldn't it be possible to trace a murder to him? Not that he was going to kill Ron; he'd been plenty hacked off at him the day before, the way he was talking about another one of his brothers dying, but he still wasn't willing to kill him. This, he thought, was how Voldemort wanted to string him up; he knew from the other life what Ron was to him. *He knew*. And even if he were to do it, how would he avoid going to Azkaban?

He looked around the Great Hall; his dad was already gone, escorting Jamie and Simon to their next classes. He caught his mother's eye and raised his eyebrows. After lunch he had Ancient Runes while Draco had Arithmancy. Perhaps he could talk to his mother in her office first, or maybe they could go to Dumbledore.

He rose and went to the door of the Great Hall, then looked over his shoulder, once more meeting his mother's gaze. He turned and went through the entrance hall, then down the stairs to her classroom and office. He waited outside the office door, leaning against the wall, crumpling the letter in his hands. When she arrived a few minutes later, as he knew she would, she silently held out her hand for the letter, and he gave it to her. She pointed her wand at the door and whispered a password to it that Harry didn't catch, and started reading the crumpled parchment while she was walking into the office. Once Harry was through the door, she slammed it and went to her desk, still reading. He sat in the chair by the fire.

When she was done, she looked up at Harry, her face grim. "Well," she said. "Obviously we need to do a better job of faking his death." Harry knew his dad had told her about Binns from the previous day. "I told Severus last night that we should have known that Binns was Dark..." she muttered, sitting heavily in her desk chair.

Harry was confused. "How should you have known?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Haven't you ever noticed, Harry, the way he goes on and on about Goblin rebellions, as though that were the biggest problem the wizarding world has ever had to face? That and Muggles burning witches and wizards. Never a word about the problems the wizarding world has had with dark wizards. As though Muggles ever would have felt the need to have witch hunts if there weren't such things as dark witches and wizards! If all magical people had only ever been benign, I doubt there would be such a thing in human history--magical or Muggle--as witch burnings. But has Binns ever talked about that? He certainly never did when I was his student, and I doubt he's started now. Every ill facing the wizarding world is the fault of other races, like Goblins, or the fault of Muggles. Never a word about Grindelwald, or the first Voldemort--"

"You know about him too?" Harry said excitedly. "I grabbed a book in the library by accident and read about him. Do you--do you think he really brought his son back from the dead?"

She sighed. "No one knows, Harry. But speaking of bringing someone back from the dead, now that Binns knows Ron Weasley isn't dead..."

"They want to see a *body*," he whispered.

"Yes, yes..." she muttered. For what seemed a long time, they sat in silence; Harry could hear the clock on the mantel ticking the minutes away. The ticking seemed to be words; they seemed to say, *Out of luck, out of luck, out of luck, out of luck...*

"Harry," his mother said suddenly. Her voice was urgent. "Here's what we must do. I will cancel my last class of the day. You'll have to miss yours as well, and Draco too."

He shrugged. "We don't have class. That's a free period for us."

She nodded. "All the better; you won't be missed." She stopped talking again, rapping her knuckles on the desk blotter, her lips drawn into a line, her brow furrowed with thought. "If only I knew where your father's old Invisibility Cloak was..."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I have it. Dumbledore had it, and he gave it to me."

Her eyes opened wide in shock. "Dumbledore had it?" Now she looked disgruntled. "You'd think he could have told me..."

"Why do you need it?"

"I don't need it; Ron Weasley needs it. We have to get him out of the castle and to a rendezvous point without him being seen. He can't stay

here if he's going to be doing foolish things like wandering around the castle. Stupid boy! Why did you say he left the hiding place?"

"Well--I didn't. He's a bit upset..."

"As are we all."

"No, this is something else--" He stammered to a halt, then felt himself flushing. "He said that Ginny's pregnant."

His mother's face didn't change expression. Her eyes bored into him, then she covered her face with her hands. When she revealed her face again, he felt he had never seen such a firm look of resolve there. The first bell rang, marking the end of lunch.

"Go to your class," she told him crisply; evidently she was not going to comment on the news that she was to be a grandmother. "Afterward, get the cloak and Draco and come to the caretaker's office. I will meet you there."

He nodded, a lump in his throat. He heard students starting to pour into the potions classroom; he looked at his mother thoughtfully. She was staring into space.

"Mum?" he said softly, twice before she looked at him. "Your class is arriving."

"Tell them I'll be out shortly; I have to light a fire so I can call someone..."

Harry did as he was told, then walked up the numerous staircases to Ancient Runes. He wondered whether she would really be focused on potions during her class. He knew he wasn't at all focused on Ancient Runes. But before he left her office, his mother had had an statement on her face that he imagined she had worn when she had been an Auror. She looked both determined and on guard, and quite formidable. It gave him a shiver up his spine, but it also made him feel that somehow, everything was going to be all right.

* * * * *

Harry drifted through Ancient Runes and bolted from the room afterward, running toward the Arithmancy classroom. He caught Draco when he was only about twenty feet from the door; he knew his friend could read the urgent statement on his face, for Draco nodded solemnly and said merely, "Where to?" in a soft voice.

"Caretaker's office," Harry whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

They moved swiftly down the intervening staircases, slipping between students climbing toward them, the faces mere blurs as they hurried to keep what Harry felt would be the most important appointment of his life. They ran together to their dorm so Harry could get the cloak, then ran out of Slytherin House again and staggered to a halt outside the caretaker's office, knocking on the heavy wooden door. His mother opened it. Dumbledore stood, looking like Davy again with his enlarged nose and lack of glasses, near the back wall where the entrance portal to the hiding place had been.

"Here's how it's going to be, boys," his mother said without preamble as soon as the office door was closed again. "Officially, I am taking you into the foothills to get potions ingredients. You are doing this with me as a detention. Ron Weasley will be with us, wearing the Invisibility Cloak. We will actually be going to a cave I know of; I have contacted one of the operatives, who will meet us there and take Weasley to a safe house. Afterward, we will transfigure a dead animal to look like his corpse, as it would appear if he had been lost in that snowstorm three weeks ago and perished in the woods. Understood?"

They nodded. Dumbledore opened the archway and Harry's mother walked through with him. "We'll be right back," she said solemnly. Harry heard their footsteps disappearing up the stone stairs. He sat down in a chair, staring at his hands.

"I wish I could see Ginny, hold her, tell her everything's going to be all right....I can't believe she's going to have a baby..."

Draco also sat, shaking his head. "You are so lucky, Harry."

Harry jerked his head up. "What? Are you mad?"

But his friend just looked very sad and envious. "Don't you think I'd be doing handsprings if just one girl I'd shagged came to me and told me she was going to have my baby? Even if it meant Jamie never talked to me again?"

"What are you talking about? And I'd been meaning to ask you about that anyway; about whether you might be a dad..."

Draco sighed. "There was this--incident. When I was fourteen. During summer holiday. I never told you all of it. Remember how I was in hospital that summer?"

"Yeah. You had some Muggle disease you'd picked up in France, you said."

Draco nodded. "It was a Muggle disease you're supposed to get when you're very young. If you get it once you're a man--"

"Oh, at fourteen you were already a man?" Harry smiled. Draco bristled.

"Man enough. Anyway, if you get it after you're--physically mature--" He swallowed. "The doctors said I would probably never have children. They told my mum. She lied to my dad, though. Said it would be all right."

"Why?"

"Why? This is my dad we're talking about. She was sure he'd kill me--and I mean *actually* kill me if he found out. Then he'd probably kill her."

"I know I just said this, but why?"

"Because she had a hard time giving birth to me. She can't have any more kids. And sure, in theory he could just divorce her, but that would take longer than two seconds, and my dad's not known for patience. If he wanted an heir who would also produce heirs, he would just kill her and marry someone else who could do what's necessary. I think she knew she had to lie to him to save both of us."

Harry pondered this. "Is that why--is that why you were with so many girls? You were *hoping* you'd get one of them pregnant?"

Draco threw up his hands. "Of course! Not that it's happened. And I had to reassure them, of course, so I told them I'd created this special potion for men that prevented me from getting a girl pregnant. Frankly, I had more girls coming after me than I really wanted once *that* got out. Or at least, girls I didn't really fancy. You know what I mean."

Harry remembered Niamh Quirke in library, saying to him, "I've heard about you." So, did she mean she'd heard that a girl could have a good time with Draco Malfoy without having to worry about pregnancy? It certainly sounded that way.

"So--none of those babies Stu said he'd heard being born in the infirmary--none of those were yours?"

"What? No, of course not. Anyway, I think I know what you're talking about; most of those girls are from the village. You know; June brides right after finishing their seventh year, then right into having babies. The Ministry is supposedly paying out incentives. And Pomfrey is the only one near Hogsmeade qualified for midwifing."

"Oooh--" Harry breathed.

"Now, granted, there are some students who've had babies. You hear things. But none of the kids were mine, I can tell you that." He sighed. "I wish just *one* were, but no such luck...That's why I didn't tell Jamie how I felt about her for so long. Finally, I just--I couldn't *not* tell her. But I was

still worried. I mean--I really love Jamie, Harry. I know we're young, but I want to be with her the rest of my life. And eventually--well, eventually, she's going to want a child. And I can't give her that."

Harry didn't know what to say; he wanted to be reassuring and comforting, tell him that maybe Jamie *wouldn't* want a baby, but all that came out was, "Oh, Draco..."

Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming down the stairs beyond the archway, and the next thing he knew, Ginny was flinging herself at him, and he was holding her close, his face in her hair, her lips on his neck, and he felt like laughing and crying all at once. Over her shoulder, he saw Ron scowling at him. He separated from her reluctantly, but not by much; he put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length, searching her face. Her large brown eyes looked reddish and tired, her skin was sallow and her cheekbones were rather sharp. He wanted to say something comforting, but he wasn't sure what. Instead, what came out, barely above a whisper, was, "I--I thought Madam Pomfrey gave you the potion." He remembered the vile-looking grey brew he'd seen her drinking in the infirmary after they'd returned from the Quidditch changing rooms.

She looked down, speaking softly. "That was something else. I asked her about the potion; I didn't tell her *I* needed it, but I'd heard about it and wondered whether it really worked....Well, she said it worked well enough, but it's been illegal in the wizarding world for the last seven years. I agreed with her that the labor shortage and all made it necessary....I don't think she suspected anything. And she's had that memory charm put on her anyway..."

He shook his head sadly. "But Ginny--why didn't you *say* anything? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

She still looked down. "I--I couldn't. And then I went into hiding with Ron....I just sort of thought of the motto of the Chudley Cannons. You know, *Let's just keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best.*" She looked up at him pleadingly, as though she were afraid he would be angry with her.

Instead, he had to resist the urge to laugh, as he pulled her to him again, holding onto her for dear life. He looked at Ron and Draco, who had very different opinions of the desirability of Ginny being pregnant. But there was no more opportunity to discuss this now; his mother and Dumbledore emerged at last from the archway.

"You two," Dumbledore said to Ron and Ginny, "move far too quickly for an old man like me." He turned to Ginny. "And now you have seen Harry. I'm afraid you need to go back. We agreed." She nodded at him, then turned to Harry and stood on tiptoe, kissing him lightly on the lips. He held her tightly for a moment, his eyes closed, whispering, "*I love you,*"

into her ear; then he released her and watched Dumbledore lead her away from him again. When they had gone through the archway, it disappeared once more.

His mother held her hand out to him, all business now. "The cloak, please." He extracted it from his pocket and gave it to her. She draped it over Ron, who promptly disappeared. "Now," she said to the air where he'd been standing a moment before, "it's a long walk to the rendezvous point. Stay close to us, make sure no one comes in contact with you, and say nothing."

"Where is this safe house?" came Ron's voice from under the cloak. "Will I be able to contact my parents? Or Charlie?"

"I can't tell you that now. We need to focus on getting you out of the castle. If you hadn't let yourself be seen by Binns..."

Ron sounded surly now. "Yeah, well if your *son* hadn't knocked up my *sister*..."

Her voice took on a nasty edge. "Do you want our help staying alive or not?"

He was silent for a moment. Then Harry heard his voice again, softer and more conciliatory now. "All right. I'm ready."

The four of them left the caretaker's office, his mother first, followed by Draco, then what seemed to be a gap but was really Ron, and finally, Harry bringing up the rear. They managed to reach the entrance hall without meeting anyone. Harry's mother opened the front door of the castle, letting in a wintry blast of cold air, and somehow, Harry felt that was a bad omen. *I don't like this*, he thought. How do we know the operative we're meeting isn't a double agent? *How do we know Binns doesn't have his own Invisibility Cloak, that he isn't following us to the rendezvous point?*

But he followed the two visible people and one invisible person out the door and into the cold winter's day, his sister's birthday, not saying a word about his doubts and fears. He kept looking all about and listening for sounds made by unseen feet other than Ron's, but it genuinely seemed that only the four of them were trekking into the foothills where he'd been before. The higher he climbed, the more he became convinced that their destination was the same cave where he and Ron and Hermione had met with Sirius during the Triwizard Tournament, when his godfather had returned to Hogwarts, concerned because Harry had told him about the pain in his scar.

And then, there it was; the very cave he remembered. They were all winded and cold; Harry could tell Ron was as tired as the rest of them.

More than once, he had ploughed into Ron when he had slowed down. They had to duck to enter, as Harry remembered, but soon after they were able to straighten up. Ron removed the cloak, and Harry's mother lit a candle she had brought and placed it on a ledge; then she enchanted the wall behind the candle to act like a mirror, so the light would be doubled.

They all sighed with relief; the cave was also somewhat warmer than the outdoors, being sheltered from the wind. Harry took the Invisibility Cloak from Ron and put it in his pocket. Ron looked around the cave; it was actually quite high, and there were two legs, each branching off from a space near the opening. The shallow leg was only about fifteen feet deep, the deep one more like forty feet. The bones of small animals littered the dusty floor. Ron started wandering around the cave aimlessly, his hands deep in his pockets. He turned around near the deepest part of the shallow leg, sighing.

"All right, when is this person coming to take me to the safe house?"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Without warning, Harry's mother had whipped out her wand and pointed it at Ron. He only flew back a couple of feet, against what looked like a packed earthen wall, while his wand flew neatly into her hand. She pocketed it. Harry walked toward her, frowning.

"What the hell--?"

"*Expelliarmus!*" she shouted again, this time pointing her wand at Draco, who flew back further, about seven feet, striking the wall of the cave more painfully than Ron, who hadn't hit rock, but softer earth. Draco's wand was now in Harry's mother's hand and Draco sat on the floor of the cave where he'd been thrown, rubbing the back of his head.

Harry stood between Draco and Ron, his wand out now, tensed and ready to respond to or dodge a spell coming from her. Had his mother gone insane? "What are you *doing*, Mum?"

"What I should have done as soon as I heard what was expected of you; making sure you actually do it."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You are going to kill Ron Weasley now, so we can put all this to rest. Then Severus is going to kill Charlie Weasley and all of my children will be safe again. You're lucky the girl has the sense to stay hidden, Draco. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for her brothers." She glared at Ron, who was pressed against the wall where the spell had thrown him, goggling at his potions professor.

Harry shook his head, as though that would clear his ears and allow him to hear what she'd *really* said. "You--you're mad! I'm not killing *anyone*, least of all Ginny's brother! What's wrong with doing what you said? You know, transfiguring a dead animal to look like Ron's corpse...."

She gave him a hard look. "Any wizard worth his salt will check for a transfiguration charm like that. I just said that to get the three of you up here."

Harry glanced at Draco, who looked more frightened than he did at the initiation. "What do you need him for? Let him go, Mum."

"I need him for this," she said, pointing her wand at him. "He is your best friend. Either you kill Weasley when I tell you to, or I start hurting him."

Harry frowned, looking back and forth between his mother and his best friend. "You--you wouldn't do that to Draco! Mum--Jamie loves him! You--you can't! He's my--"

"If you don't want your best friend to suffer, kill Weasley," she said coldly, her green eyes glittering. Harry wanted to shake some sense into her.

"Mum, why are you doing this?"

Her lip shook a little, and her wand quivered, although it still pointed at Draco. "Harry, if I have to choose between my children and someone else's, I'm going to choose my own. I'm doing what's necessary. What's necessary to keep you alive...."

"But--but you said that it was to protect Jamie and Simon--"

"Them too! But--but mostly you--I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you--" Her voice was full of tears. Harry looked at her pleadingly.

"Don't, Mum. I can take care of myself."

"No!" she answered, suddenly angry. "You don't know! You have no idea what he did..."

"What *who* did?"

She looked up at him with infinitely sad eyes. "When you were a baby. The night your father was killed....When I told him I would raise you to be his servant, he put a spell on you...an Obedience Charm. I've no doubt Draco had it put on him as well," she nodded at his friend. "It's dark magic; it drains a good deal of power from the person casting the spell. And putting it on two people in a short span of time--I wouldn't be surprised if it had almost made him mortal again."

Harry thought, *That's why he's obsessed with getting more powerful, because he gave some of his power to me and Draco.* "But why," he asked her, "would someone do that? If it's so draining?"

She swallowed. "I said it is an Obedience Charm. When you were initiated, both of you, did he give you any direct orders?"

"Well--he asked me some questions. My answers weren't really strictly truthful, but--"

"Questions are not commands. Did he *command* you to do anything?"

"He--he made us kneel. But that was just something he *did*. The next thing we knew--we were kneeling."

"What else?"

Keep her talking, he thought. Distract her. "Well--" he wracked his brain. "After he--he put Cruciatus on us, he asked us to ask him not to do it again, and we did." She nodded and he went on. "And he had both of us put out our arms to receive the Dark Mark...later he had me hand him my wand. Technically, I handed him Draco's wand, but he thought it was mine...What's all this about, Mum?"

She looked thoughtful, and he thought her guard might be down. "Hmm. Perhaps that is what's important..." she said in a musing voice.

"What's important?"

"Well, at that moment, that wand was in your possession, so it was yours..."

"I don't understand. How does the Obedience Charm work?"

Suddenly her look toward him was gentle again, motherly. "I wouldn't have let him do it if I'd known, Harry. Please believe that. It's very powerful. The reason why it drains power from the person casting it is so that the person acting on their behalf will be more likely to have the ability to carry out the commands. If the person who cast the charm gives you a direct order and you refuse, you will drop down dead. If that person gives you a direct order and you agree to it, if it is at all possible, you will do it, or die in the attempt. It is far stronger than Imperius, which a person can overcome with enough willpower. There is no fighting this. It is absolutely impossible; obviously, the thing that prevents dark wizards from using it constantly is the power drain factor. Once you cast this spell on someone, a portion of your power is gone forever and lives in the other person until they die. And if they refuse to do what they are commanded, and they do die--that power dies with them. Probably no one other than Voldemort could have cast the spell twice within six months and still have

any power left himself. And so far, he's used intermediaries to ask you to do things, other than at the initiation. But if it goes further, Harry I'm afraid--"

"What, Mum? What are you afraid of?"

She started crying. "I'm afraid he'll command you to do it himself, personally. I'm afraid that if he does that, you'll refuse, and die..." Her voice had become very soft.

Harry remembered the heir, the way he had agreed to be sacrificed. Had Voldemort done it again? Had he put the Obedience Charm on his grandson, hoping to get his power back when he partook of the body after killing him? Was that what he was planning to do to Harry, and Draco? Reclaim their power--or rather, his power--through the ritual sacrifice and consumption of that sacrifice? And his mother had altered his school records so perhaps Voldemort wouldn't think very much of his power was in Harry, so there'd be little to gain in either using him or sacrificing him....

But he was tired of being afraid. Harry lifted his chin and looked her in the eye. "If he did give me a direct order to kill Ron, yes, I would refuse. I'd rather die myself than be a murderer. That's why we need to make him think Ron's dead..."

"No! That won't work! It must be done properly. This isn't open for discussion. You kill him or--"

--or you'll torture Draco. But Mum--even if I wanted to--which I don't--I don't think I could do the killing curse. You need a powerful amount of magic to put behind that curse..."

She nodded at him. "I know. You've got it. Because of the Obedience Charm. Trust me. You can do this."

"*Trust you?*" he practically squeaked. He was completely incredulous. He couldn't take this any more; he wasn't going to allow this to happen. If he had to see his mother locked up in St. Mungo's, a raving lunatic, then he would. But he would not allow either Ron to die or Draco to be hurt. She was truly mad....

For a split second, it looked like her attention had wandered, and he stepped between her and Draco, yelling, "Run, Draco! Go get help!"

His mother pointed her wand, trying to get a clear shot at Draco, but Harry being in the way frustrated her, and his best friend tumbled out the cave door, desperate to get away. His mother advanced on Harry, then stopped.

"That was stupid, Harry. Very stupid. Now when someone comes and finds him dead, *you'll* be blamed. I don't want you dead or in Azkaban. Just--"

"No!" he practically roared. "You don't know what you're doing, Mum." Then he looked at her sadly. "Mum, mum," he muttered now, "the way you are now, so driven to protect me--it's because you're under Imperius. You have been, for years. But all you were told to do was to protect me at all costs. Which is only natural, it's a mother's instinct, most of the time. Do you know what happens when someone under Imperius is told to do something they already want to do? It becomes almost impossible to resist, because the desire was already there. It reinforces it, brings it to the surface if the person was previously resisting...."

"What are you talking about, Harry? When was I placed under Imperius?"

"The night my father was killed," he whispered.

"That's ridiculous. Who did it?"

His throat wasn't working very well, but he managed to choke out, "It's all my fault, Mum. I did it...that's why you promised me to Voldemort..."

She made a face. "I think you're the one who's mad, Harry. You were a baby. How could you put me under Imperius?"

He worked his mouth, wanting to tell her it was to save her, wanting to tell her that he'd somehow been convinced that his life would have been wonderful if he'd only grown up with his parents, or at least one of his parents....How he had the best of intentions, especially after hearing that she'd been carrying Jamie at the time of her death....

But before he could say anything, she was trying to catch him off guard, and was pointing her wand at Ron Weasley herself now. Ron pressed himself back into the wall, his eyes wild; he hadn't said anything this whole time, since Harry's mother had disarmed him.

"No, Mum!" Harry shouted, suddenly waking up.

"Harry, I said that if Voldemort tells you point blank to do something, and it *is* possible to do, and you accept, then you *will* do it. But if it is *not* possible....nothing. There is no effect. You are not driven to do it, and you do not die. Well, if he tells you to kill someone who is already dead, you can't very well kill them again, can you?"

He shook his head; it felt like it was going to explode. "No, Mum!" he said again. "I'm not a murderer--but neither are you! I won't have you do this just to protect me. *No one is going to kill Ron Weasley!*"

But his mother was not looking at him; she was looking at Ron, concentrating on him more hate than Harry ever thought it was possible for her to show. She was protecting her children; she was doing whatever was necessary, above all, to protect him, her Harry....

"My dad can put your whole family into hiding," Ron stuttered now. "He works for the Ministry. You'll all be perfectly safe..."

His mother snorted. "I have nothing against your father, Weasley. He's a good man. He's one of a kind. That's the problem; there's only one of him. And he is too trusting. You have no idea how many people work closely with him who should *not* be trusted. The Ministry is infested with Death Eaters. It's rotten to the core; there's no way to be safe if the Ministry arranges our going into hiding. We'll all be dead within a week. No; there's only one way--"

She pointed her wand, straight and sure; it looked to Harry as though she were aiming right between Ron's eyes. Just before she started saying the curse, Harry's scalp prickled all over, and he already knew what he must do; it was the only thing that saved Ron.

"*Avada Ke--*"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

His spell exploded upon her with the force of a tidal wave; she rocketed backward along the long arm of the cave faster than Harry had ever seen anyone go who was being disarmed. She struck the hard cave wall with two separate sounds; a heavy thud, which was her body, and a loud, sickening *crack!* Harry didn't know what had made the sharp noise. Her body fell to the dusty floor of the cave; the light from the candle flickered behind him, throwing his shadow before him as he walked carefully down the length of the cave to his mother. When he was a few feet away from her, he stopped, afraid to go on. He stared and stared at her, willing her to brush her hair from where it lay across her face, or cry out or yell at him or whimper. An open, staring eye did not move. He waited for it to blink, or just close in pain. He looked up at the cave wall and saw a dark red glossy stain there, and he swallowed. He heard footsteps and felt more than saw Ron come to stand beside him, also looking down at his mother.

Lily Evans was utterly still.

Chapter Thirteen

Justice

Harry shook his head in disbelief, swallowing. His legs collapsed beneath him, and he found himself kneeling in the cold dirt, continuing to stare

incredulously. He inched forward on his knees, approaching her cautiously.

"Mum?" he choked. "Mum?" he ventured, more softly. He was looking right down at her now. Ron followed him; he sank down onto his haunches next to Harry. He looked up at Ron and couldn't see him clearly; suddenly, it was impossible to get his eyes to focus. It was as though he didn't have his glasses on at all.

"Potter," said the indistinct red-headed blur that was Ron Weasley, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder. His voice was very soft. "I don't think--I don't think there's anything to be done."

Harry swallowed and pushed up his glasses, blinking rapidly. Ron came into focus now; the trouble was, he could see his mother, too. "I was just trying to disarm her." He still whispered. "She would have killed you..."

Ron looked very white and nodded. "You saved my life. Unfortunately..."

Harry frowned. "Saving your life was *unfortunate*?"

"I didn't say that." Ron straightened up. "You didn't let me finish. I was going to say, unfortunately, the Ministry doesn't care about things like that."

"Things like what?"

"Self-defense. Or in this case, defense of someone else."

Suddenly, Harry heard a voice in his head: Sam Bell's voice. *Accidental or not, a person was still dead. The spell I cast was to blame. It wasn't the killing curse, but it still killed. That was all that mattered.*

"But--but you could *tell* them. She was going to torture Draco if I didn't kill you; she was in the middle of performing the killing curse. It was just the Disarming Charm. It was just..." He trailed off, looking down at his mother, then tentatively brushing the hair out of her face; now there was a small viscous puddle of red on the cave floor, under her head. Her vivid green eyes seemed to look directly into his, but those eyes would never see again. He gently brushed his hand over her eyelids, closing them, then smoothing her hair somewhat aimlessly. His eyes ached as though he'd been rubbing them hard for days on end.

"She was just trying to--to--" but he couldn't finish. *Just trying to protect me. Like I was just trying to save her life when I put Imperius on her...*

He looked up at Ron. "Someone will probably be here soon. Draco will have gotten someone. Could you--could you give me a few minutes alone? With my mum?"

Ron nodded and started to go, then turned. "Potter." Harry lifted his head and looked at him. "Did you mean it? That--that if You-Know-Who told you right out that he wanted you to kill me, you'd refuse, knowing that you'd die?"

Harry gulped and nodded. "I'm not a killer. I--I never meant to hurt my mum--"

"I know," Ron whispered. "It's just that--I don't know that I would have done the same thing. I mean, all these years in school, we haven't--"

"Yes."

"And I just tried to--when I found out about Ginny--"

"Yes." Harry said again. He remembered when Ron was only twelve, seeing him lying on McGonagall's giant chessboard after letting he'd let himself be taken; he remembered him sprawled on the bed in the Shrieking Shack, in agony from his broken leg, telling Sirius Black, whom he thought was a Death Eater and a murderer, that if he killed Harry, he would have to kill him and Hermione too...He remembered reentering his body after Ron had put the Cruciatus Curse on him, his best friend looking down at him and saying simply, "*You back?*" in that tone of voice that told simultaneously told Harry, *I knew you'd be okay, and You should have known all along that I'm with you. I'm your best friend, and I always will be.* Ron had risked going to Azkaban for the rest of his life, if anyone had seriously believed that he'd put Cruciatus on Harry....

"You never know, Weasley," he said evenly. "In my place--you might have done the same."

Ron gave him a small half-smile, looking doubtful, then put the Invisibility Cloak back on; Harry heard him scuffling on his knees as he left the cave. He turned back to his mother. He wanted to do something, sing for her like she and Jamie had done for Stu, but his throat was too tight; he sat instead, talking to her softly as though she could hear, telling her about his life--his other life. Was she nearby? he wondered. Was she a ghost now, like his father? Or did her dying mean that she and his father could leave this world, that they could be together in their afterlife, as they were meant to be?

He didn't know; he just kept whispering, not knowing whether she could hear him, just needing to get it out. He told her about the Dursleys, about Hagrid telling him he was a wizard, about the first time he saw her and his father in the Mirror of Erised....And then he remembered something Dumbledore had said about men wasting away for years, staring into the mirror, and about people choosing precisely what is the worst thing for themselves. But in choosing my mother and sister, he thought, how did I choose the worst thing for me? A family is supposed to be a good thing.

Then another voice in his brain said, *But was it the best thing for the world?*

He stopped talking, looking down at her again, seeing her as others would see her: violently murdered by her own son. He thought of Sam again. *I'm going to Azkaban*, he thought. *With the dementors*. He shivered all over; *No*. I won't be like Sam, he thought. Sam Bell was eaten up with guilt; he capitulated without a fight. I--I feel responsible for my mother dying, but--but it's *defensible*. I won't just lie down and let them put me away. I'm going to *fight*. He brushed his hand across her brow; I have to fix things. I can't do that from prison....

He heard voices. They were coming for him. He had a sudden panicky thought. *What if they break my wand? Then how will I ever change back the timelines?*

He looked around; there had to be something he could do. He'd managed to hide Voldemort's wand; if his own wand were broken, hiding Voldemort's wand would have been completely pointless. He scrambled around, finding some loose stones; he tucked his wand into a long, thin space at the bottom of the cave wall and stacked stones against it and on top of it, like a small cairn, until it was hidden from sight. Then he removed his mother's wand from her grasp and put it in his pocket. In her other hand she held Ron's and Draco's wands. He took these from her and put them in his other pocket, then sat down next to her again, waiting for the tears to come. *Why can't I cry?* he wondered. *Because*, his brain told him, she was supposed to be dead all along. You mourned your mother years ago....

Someone was entering the cave, crawling on all fours, then standing up, brushing down black robes...

It was Severus Snape.

Harry wished *he* were dead once he saw the expression on his dad's face. "Lily!" he cried hoarsely, running to the two of them. Dumbledore entered the cave then, looking like Davy. Heedless of the blood, Harry's stepfather sank to the cave floor next to Harry and pulled her onto his lap, leaning down and kissing her cold lips, his tears falling on her pale, white skin; far, far too pale....

He looked up at Harry, his dark eyes wild. "What happened?"

Harry looked to Dumbledore; he was glad that he appeared as Davy at this moment. He was a little less formidable this way. It made it easier for Harry to choke out the terrible story. As he explained (leaving out the part about telling his mother he'd been the one to put her under Imperius), Dumbledore nodded sagely.

"I wasn't worried about the body identification, as she was," he said slowly. "I think she was being a bit overcautious there. But after you had all left the castle, I realized that she hadn't said which operative was meeting you up here.... I called all of them to find out which one, and which safe house was going to be used. I managed to reach everyone fairly quickly, and none of them said they'd heard from Lily. I thought her manner had been somewhat peculiar, so I explained to Sirius what I thought was going on and told him to call some Aurors, anyone who used to work with Lily, and tell them to get up here. I hoped that someone who had known her in the old days might be able to talk some sense into her. Then I set out from the castle and met Draco when he was about half-way back; I had him fetch your stepfather. I had hoped to be here before something happened, but when I arrived, Ron Weasley was blocking the way into the cave, wearing your Invisibility Cloak."

Harry looked to his stepfather, but he was oblivious; he had not noticed the comment about the cloak. Dumbledore continued. "Ron informed me of what occurred, but I decided to leave you alone with your mother until your stepfather arrived."

Harry swallowed. "It was an accident," he whispered. "I never meant--"

Dumbledore stopped him with a raised hand. "We know, Harry. The trouble is, the Ministry will only care that you cast the spell that resulted in her death. Now I wish I hadn't had Sirius call Aurors....We need to get you out of here. You're the one who needs a safe house now."

Harry started; would that work? Should he perhaps take his wand out of its hiding place? How could he, now that his dad and Dumbledore were here? How could he explain hiding his wand? And if he went into hiding, how would he get out to retrieve Voldemort's wand from its hiding place? It might be as bad as going to Azkaban--without the dementors.

Suddenly, he heard a commotion outside the cave; several voices, including a woman's voice, were raised anxiously. Harry heard Draco trying to stop someone from entering, and then a man's voice cried out a stunning spell and Harry heard the dull thud of a body hitting the earth.

The Longbottoms entered the cave.

Frank Longbottom immediately pointed his wand at Harry. He said, "Step away boy. This doesn't concern you." He turned and looked with contempt at Dumbledore. "Get back to the school, caretaker. We'll take over from here. Have the headmistress ready to meet us in the entrance hall when we return with the murderer she deigns to keep teaching at that school; the man who murdered his own wife, who happens to be a former Auror."

Harry's jaw dropped. Could Frank Longbottom be so dead set against Severus Snape that he could believe he would kill his own wife? And how did they get here so fast?

Harry stood, shaking with anger. "Get out of here and give us some peace for a few minutes! He didn't kill my mother! He just got here! I killed her--but it was an accident! She was trying to kill Ron Weasley, and I was trying to disarm her--"

Gemma Longbottom smirked. "That's rich. Lily Evans was trying to kill someone. Too bad you chose to name a person who's already dead...."

"But--but--" Harry sputtered. He realized now why Dumbledore had wanted to get him away; the only witness to what happened could not testify to what he had seen. He turned to Dumbledore. "Binns knows he's not dead. What's the point in keeping up the charade? We need him to say what happened."

Frank Longbottom crossed his arms and glared at Harry. "You may be a Slytherin, but you are James and Lily Potter's son, so I'll ask you again to move away from the murderer and let us do our jobs...."

"No one here is a murderer! This was an accident! When I disarmed her, she went flying back...." But Harry couldn't go on; the tears that wouldn't come before suddenly wouldn't stop flowing, and he could barely speak. "And then--and then she was so still--" He swallowed repeatedly, trying to clear his throat so he could continue, but it was impossible.

Dumbledore stepped toward Frank Longbottom and put his hand on his arm. "Surely you can give grieving family members time--"

Longbottom shook his hand off. "This doesn't concern you, old man! Get out of our way!"

Dumbledore drew himself up, no longer bent over. He put his wand to his nose, muttering, "*Finite Incantatem*," and he pulled half-moon spectacles from his pocket, putting them on. Longbottom barely blinked, but Harry did see him swallow as he stared at the face of Albus Dumbledore.

"This concerns me a great deal, Longbottom," Dumbledore informed him in that dangerous voice that Harry remembered. "Harry agreed to be initiated as a Death Eater to work as a spy for me, and now he has been ordered to kill Ron Weasley. I have been hiding Ron and his--that is, I have been hiding Ron since his sister disappeared in the storm, but he was seen by Professor Binns, who happens to be a Death Eater...."

Longbottom brushed this aside. "We've heard people accuse Binns before. There is no proof against him. No one has ever witnessed him doing dark magic or consorting with Death Eaters. You, on the other hand,

disappeared after you resigned as headmaster, and now you admit that you conspired in a young boy's initiation as a Death Eater and that you are employing people to work for you against the Ministry--"

"No!" he cried, angrier than Harry had ever seen him. "Not against the Ministry--against Voldemort! There are too many people in the Ministry who are working for him for that to be a viable way to fight him. Harry would have had no choice but to be initiated, at any rate; better for him to be a spy than a loyal Death Eater, isn't it? Ron Weasley is still alive, isn't he?"

Gemma Longbottom raised one perfectly-arched eyebrow. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Suddenly, Ron, who must have crept back into the cave at some point, threw aside the Invisibility Cloak and said testily, "Then bloody well believe it."

Harry sagged with relief upon seeing him. He gave a small, grateful smile to Ron, but suddenly, the Longbottoms had overtaken him.

"*Stupefy!*" Frank Longbottom cried, while his wife caught Ron as he fell.

"What did you do that for?" Harry yelled angrily.

Gemma Longbottom looked at him. "Don't you think we'd know our son's best friend? This can't possibly be him; he would never be involved in such a thing. We need to take this person back to the Ministry and find out who took Polyjuice--that is, a potion to make themselves look like him, especially as he's dead. It's likely to be his murderer; that's probably why he was killed, so that someone could assume his identity."

Harry threw up his hands. "You're barking mad! The pair of you! That really *is* Ron Weasley. Everything Dumbledore told you is true. You don't know what you're doing!"

Frank Longbottom put up his hand to stop Harry. His tone was utterly patronizing. "Now, now, it could very well be that you thought in all sincerity that this person was Ron Weasley, and that your mother was going to kill him. But *she* probably knew who it really was, if I know Lily. You shouldn't have stopped her. An Auror can take certain *liberties* when apprehending a dark wizard, and since it's probably Ron Weasley's murderer--"

Harry was getting more and more frustrated. "She's not an Auror any more! I mean she's--she wasn't an Auror. And that *really is* Ron Weasley. I did not stop her from killing a murderer. You have to *listen...*"

"No, you'd better listen. Accident or no, you were interfering with someone who was dealing with a Dark Wizard, and you cast a spell that resulted in someone's death. Now, as you've already confessed, there's no need for a trial--"

"Confessed?" he cried, panicked. "I haven't confessed!"

Gemma Longbottom looked at him dispassionately. "Oh, yes you did. I heard you distinctly. You said, 'I killed her--but it was an accident!' It was perfectly clear."

"But--but--" he floundered. "I haven't written anything down. Why is it that she could have killed Ron Weasley--or someone you think is impersonating him--and *that* would have been justifiable, but you don't think this is?"

Frank Longbottom nodded at the prone form of Ron Weasley. "Because it's a dark wizard."

"How do you know my mother wasn't dark?"

Frank and Gemma Longbottom both laughed. "Lily Evans?" he said. "Surely you're joking."

Harry shook his head, his face dead serious. "Not about this. Suppose, just suppose, that that really *is* Ron Weasley, and that my mother was killing him as Voldemort had ordered me to do so I wouldn't have to. Would what I did be considered justifiable then?"

Gemma shrugged. "I suppose it would probably be left up to a jury."

Harry glared at them defiantly. "Then that's what I want. I want a trial. With a jury. Let *them* decide."

Frank made a face. "When someone has already confessed, to waste the Ministry's time with a trial...."

"If the jury doesn't think it was justified, I'll go to prison, won't I? And it will be just the same as if I *had* confessed. Right?"

They nodded, unhappy about this, and Harry turned to his dad, who was on his knees again, holding his wife. Harry sank down onto his haunches and put his hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, dad, but I just couldn't let her--I mean, she was about to--"

His dad nodded miserably. "I know Harry. I just wish--I wish I'd never told her--" His voice cracked.

"Never told her what?" Harry whispered.

His stepfather lifted dark, tortured eyes to him. "Never told her to promise you to the Dark Lord. If I hadn't--"

Harry squeezed his shoulder. "It's not your fault. It's not. Trust me." He looked down at his mother's face again. "And just as you two were getting back together..." he added softly.

"No," Severus Snape said, shaking his head. "We were comforting each other. We'd lost a son. It's not the same as getting back together. Something was--something was just missing. We had some good years, but lately--we were just spinning our wheels, trying to get them back, and failing...." He was quiet for a long moment. "Harry--I know you did what you had to. I'll be by your side through all this. You know that, don't you?"

Harry looked at him in amazement. He was kneeling here, silent tears running down his face, holding his wife's cold body, telling the person responsible for her death that he was going to be by his side....

Now Harry thought he was going to break down completely, but he sniffled and blinked, swallowed painfully. "Dad--you don't have to--"

"Yes," he interrupted, his voice more forceful. "I do." Harry looked in his eyes, saw the pain there, but also a kind of pride. Was he *proud* of Harry? "You're really your father's son," he whispered to him, then turned back to his wife. Was that it? Harry thought. He was remembering a sixteen-year-old James Potter saving the boyfriend of the girl he loved from two of his best friends, when Snape was someone about whom others--like Sirius Black--would merely say, "Good riddance." As far as anyone else knew, Harry and Ron were sworn enemies. No one except Voldemort had any way of knowing that they were best friends in another life....

"I'm also the product of the man who raised me," he said to his stepfather softly. The grieving man raised dark, haunted eyes to Harry and nodded in acknowledgment. *The one really lucky thing that happened to me in this life, he thought, was having you for a dad.*

Harry stood and walked toward the Longbottoms, so his dad could have some privacy again. "Can't you do whatever you're going to do to him right here?" he asked them quietly, pointing at the stunned Ron. "Then you'll see straightaway that he's really Ron Weasley." They looked disgruntled, but agreed. Harry looked to Dumbledore, abashed. "I'm sorry, sir. I've really made a mess of everything...."

Dumbledore shook his head. "We'll fight this Harry. But--we will have to protect your sister and brother, if it's to be public knowledge that Ron Weasley is alive." Harry nodded. He looked toward the Longbottoms, wondering what they'd seen, how they'd become so hard. It can't have been easy for them, he realized. They probably had to deal with real

Death Eaters so much that everyone immediately became suspect. They'd even accused *Dumbledore* of being up to something. He wondered how many Aurors wound up in St. Mungo's *without* benefit of having their brains fried by torture, just because they'd become completely paranoid.

"I know she was your friend, once," he said to them softly now. "Do you want to--" He nodded at his mother. His stepfather looked at Harry in surprise, then reluctantly stepped away from her and let them approach. "Can I revive Ron?" Harry asked them tentatively. When he had received permission, he used his mother's wand for this. Ron blinked and sat up and Harry picked up the Invisibility Cloak next to him, whispering, "You won't need this any more." He put it in his pocket; the Longbottoms had been too preoccupied to notice it after Ron had revealed himself. "And I believe this is yours," he said, removing Ron's wand from his pocket and handing it to him. The Longbottoms didn't see or hear any of this exchange; they were looking at his mother.

Ron nodded, taking the wand, and Harry helped him stand. "What did they do that for?" he said, rubbing the back of his head and giving an annoyed look to the Longbottoms. "I've been in their house countless times, Neville's been to my house, they know my parents, and the moment they see I'm alive they *stun* me?"

"They thought you might be someone who'd taken a potion to impersonate you," Harry explained to him softly, but even as he said the words, he had to try very hard not to laugh; it sounded ridiculous.

Frank Longbottom made everyone leave the cave but Ron. His wife kept her wand trained on Harry outside the cave while he performed the spell on Ron that would reveal his true form, if he was someone who had taken Polyjuice Potion (Harry recalled that Gemma Longbottom stopped herself from saying the potion name). When they emerged from the cave, Ron was smiling with relief, but Mr. Longbottom didn't look very happy; he'd clearly wanted to be proven right. Ron nodded at Harry and Harry nodded back. That was one of them off the hook, anyway.

They made a strange procession, going back to the castle. Dumbledore was disguised as Davy once more, Harry gave Draco his wand back once he had been revived (he'd been stunned before the Longbottoms entered the cave), his dad and Dumbledore levitated his mother's body, and the Longbottoms kept their wands trained on Harry, Ron and Draco, who walked ahead, looking nervously at each other. Harry still wasn't sure that the Longbottoms were completely convinced about Ron, and they seemed to think something was up with Draco as well. Harry and Draco had never been very fond of Neville in this life, but Ron was very perplexed at his best friend's parents not trusting him.

When they reached the entrance hall, unfortunately, it was time for the evening meal, and as a result, it was swarming with students who

immediately spotted Lily Evans' body and started screaming; the Longbottoms were also recognized, but if Aurors were here and Professor Evans was dead, that must mean that one of the other people was to blame. Harry saw people looking suspiciously at him, Draco, his dad and the caretaker. Then it finally dawned on someone that Ron was there, too.

"Look! It's Ron Weasley! He didn't die in the blizzard!"

A ripple of excitement moved through the crowd, and suddenly, Cho Chang pushed her way through, screaming, "Let me past! I'm the Head Girl!" When she finally reached Ron, she threw her arms around him, weeping uncontrollably, and Ron took her in his arms somewhat sheepishly.

Professor McGonagall followed soon after, and Harry thought he had never seen her look so astonished; her lips became very thin indeed as she pulled her mouth into a line and her eyes went wide upon seeing Ron and Harry's mother's body. Her eyes went even wider when the Longbottoms explained to her that they were taking Harry into custody, and that he would be tried for his mother's murder. Harry couldn't look at her. The entrance hall was so quiet now you could hear a pin drop. When Minerva McGonagall was disappointed in you...well, you didn't want to see that expression on her face, ever.

Harry saw through the open front door that the Aurors had already summoned a purple carriage from the Ministry; it looked to Harry like the sort of vehicle they'd used to take Remus Lupin away. If he was going to have a jury trial, if he was to have a chance to prove his innocence, this was how it had to be. There was to be no dilly-dallying; as he was leaving, the Longbottoms standing with their wands trained on him suspiciously, Ron extended his hand (having extricated himself from Cho).

"I'll be there to testify, Potter," he said firmly. Harry nodded at him gratefully. Next, Harry looked at Draco, whose eyes were shining with tears.

"Dammit, Harry," he said, sounding more irritated with himself than Harry for getting so emotional, then gave him a brief, gruff hug, before turning away.

Finally, his dad looked down at him sadly, and the fatherly hug he gave Harry went to his heart as nothing else had. *We'll get through this*, Harry thought. *And then I'll fix it so you won't have to remember losing a wife or a son....*

Harry felt the eyes of every student in the school on him as he followed the Longbottoms out the door. Young black-robed witches and wizards stood on the marble stairs leading down into the entrance hall; they hung over the balcony rails and banisters one and two stories up. Everywhere

he looked, he saw faces staring down at him in awe, watching Harry Potter being *arrested for murder*. And then he saw them.

His brother and sister leaned over the railing half-way up the marble stairs. Harry swallowed, gazing at them. *I'm sorry*, he mouthed silently. Jamie was crying; she put her arm around Simon's shoulder, and he leaned against her, dry eyed, but looking permanently mournful (ever since his twin had died). Harry couldn't bear the expressions on their faces any more and he turned away from them, his heart aching.

He turned his wand (really his mother's wand) over to Gemma Longbottom, and his dad, Draco and Ron trailed him out the front door. Just before he followed the Aurors down the front steps of the castle, he surreptitiously pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and stuffed it into Draco's hands. "Keep it safe," he whispered, and Draco's eyes went wide; he'd never imagined having such a thing for his own use. Harry tried to smile at him but he couldn't quite get his face to contort in that way. He walked down the castle steps.

Frank Longbottom opened the back door of the wagon and put his hand on Harry's upper arm, "helping" him step in, but it really amounted almost to throwing him in. Harry's back was immediately sucked against the wall, and he found that he couldn't move; it obviously a spell designed to keep prisoners from being able to freely move around the back of the wagon. He thought about Remus Lupin being sucked into the interior of the wagon when the Longbottoms had come to take him to the werewolf camp. He hadn't known, at the time....

The last thing he saw before the door closed was his dad, nodding at him, but also looking grim. With the door closed, there was no light at all in the wagon. Harry sat in inky darkness, and wrapped his hand around the basilisk amulet on his chest for comfort. The vehicle rocked as it moved forward, but after just a few yards, there was a sudden loud *popping!* noise, and he suspected that they were no longer at Hogwarts. Harry was now in the custody of the Ministry of Magic.

He was going to be tried for the murder of Lily Evans.

* * * * *

"Potter!" came the gruff voice for the second time within only about a half-hour. That was unusual; the meager meal had been served about fifteen minutes earlier, magicked through the solid wood, windowless cell door. Harry had merely picked at it. It was a thin gruel with a mealy texture, accompanied by coarse, stale bread that his aunt would have thrown away. (Harry used to steal the old bread to feed Hedwig when she was forbidden to fly outdoors and hunt for her own food.) He had a tin mug of tepid water for a beverage, and this he had drunk quickly, feeling parched, before dipping his wooden spoon into the gruel and forcing down

a couple of mouthfuls. The guard limped down the corridor between the mostly-empty holding cells, a dementor by his side. As the tall, thin creature approached, Harry felt the now-familiar sickening coldness creep over his mind and body. He shook violently, trying to keep his head clear, but it was very difficult. Little by little, the dementors were already sucking all the joy he'd ever felt--in either life--out of his mind, leaving him a twitching, paranoid shell of his former self. He sometimes managed to distract himself by exercising, doing mindless repetitions of push-ups and sit-ups and, for variety, running in place, but sometimes he simply fingered the basilisk amulet under his shirt to feel better; it was one of the only things that brought him any small peace of mind, any comfort, in this comfortless place.

"Ye 'ave a visitor," the guard snarled. He was an old man of indiscriminate age--anywhere from sixty to a hundred and twenty years old--with long white hair, deep fissures running down his face, robes that looked as though they hadn't been washed during the twentieth century, and a limp. He looked more weather-beaten even than the Mad-Eye Moody from Harry's old life. The guard seemed to feel no discomfort from the dementors at all. Then again, Harry had thought more than once, perhaps he'd never had any joy to lose....

Clutching the amulet as if for dear life, Harry backed against the rear wall of his cell when the door was opened, so he was as far as possible from the dementor. He was relieved to see that his visitor was Dumbledore, his Davy-disguise still intact. Harry had been afraid that it was going to be another Ministry employee with an automatic quill, itching to take down his confession and avert a trial. He'd already received visits from three such people, the last one a very pretty strawberry-blonde witch who was only about nineteen, wearing a rather tight robe. Harry recognized her as having recently finished her schooling at Hogwarts (he seemed to remember her being in either Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff). Harry didn't have to guess why *she'd* been sent.

After the guard locked them in together, Dumbledore nodded at Harry and sat on the small stool in the middle of the stone-walled room. Harry moved to sit on the edge of his narrow bed (which he suspected had fleas living in it) and lifted haunted eyes to the old man, who looked shaken at seeing Harry like this.

"How are you, Harry?" he asked quietly. His blue eyes looked dull and did not twinkle at all.

Harry sighed. "Tired of waiting. When's the trial?"

"That is why I am here to see you. It's to be next Thursday. Then they'll keep the jury overnight and get the verdict on Friday."

"What's today?" Harry had already lost track of time; the walls were as windowless as the door, and he couldn't hear the outside world at all, either. He assumed that he was far underground in London, somewhere in one of the abandoned tube stations that made up the Ministry of Magic. He'd heard a man being dragged past his cell on the day he had arrived, being taken to his trial. We must be close to the portal to the courtroom, he thought, remembering the echoing underground chamber with the serried rows of seats, lit only by flaming torches. The only light came from a single flickering magical candle high up on the wall, which never went out. He'd tried asking for it to be extinguished when he wanted to sleep, to no avail.

"Today is Friday the twenty-eighth of February."

"And the trial isn't to be until next Thursday? That's almost another week! Why so long?"

"They're waiting for the Inquisitor to return. He's on a trip."

"Can't they get some other Inquisitor to do it?"

Dumbledore heaved a great sigh. "This *is* some other Inquisitor. It's to be the Minister of Magic himself, Barty Crouch. He has insisted. If it were going to be Fudge or Bean, you could have been tried as early as yesterday or the day before. But Crouch--"

Harry shook his head. "No! He just wants to get on a soapbox! He wants to shore up his sagging support and keep his power!"

Dumbledore nodded. "I don't disagree with your assessment, Harry, but we have no choice in this. The Minister is meeting with ambassadors in our embassies in Brussels and Luxembourg, and after that he is scheduled to move on to Vienna and the USSR." *Which shouldn't still exist*, Harry thought, remembering the newspaper he'd gotten at Maggie's and Bernard's flat. "Your trial will commence almost the instant he's back on British soil, but although he has insisted on being the Inquisitor, he could not be persuaded to cut his trip short."

Harry paced, running his hand through his hair. He had what looked like a permanent dark shadow on his face because he used his Animagus powers everyday to shorten his beard, but he didn't do it all the way, so there was always just a little growth protruding from the follicles. He'd taken to changing into a golden griffin to sleep and also for a number of hours during the day, keeping an ear out for when someone was approaching so he could quickly change back. He'd found, as Sirius had in his other life, that it was just a little easier to withstand the dementors when in the form of an animal, whose minds were not as easy for the dementors to prey upon. *Perhaps it helps even more that a griffin is a magical creature*, he

thought. When he wasn't a griffin, or exercising, he tried to hold onto the amulet as much as possible.

"*Barty Crouch*," Harry muttered while he paced. He remembered the way he'd reminded Harry so forcefully of a bank president when he'd been dressed in Muggle clothes for the Quidditch World Cup, the one flaw being that bank presidents didn't show up in the middle of nowhere in their nicest suits. Crouch seemed to have overlooked that. Why was he so insistent on being the Inquisitor for Harry's case? The Minister didn't usually do that. Harry also remembered seeing Crouch send his own son to Azkaban. What would he do to *Harry*?

"Harry, please sit. We need to discuss a number of things, but I can't really *talk* to you about them."

Harry sat on the lumpy mattress again. "*What?*" He furrowed his brow. Dumbledore drew the stool closer and took a piece of parchment and a self-inking quill out of his robe pocket. He wrote something on the parchment and then handed it to Harry with the quill.

I have charmed this parchment, he wrote, so that only you and I can write on it or see what is written on it. I suspect that someone is listening to us. There are things we must discuss without others hearing.

Harry read it and nodded. He had an idea what sort of things Dumbledore was talking about.

How's Ginny? he wrote. And the baby?

Dumbledore read this and sighed, then picked up the quill to write a reply.

That is one of the things I must tell you. Ginny is not going to have a child. She never was. From the time she went into hiding, she had virtually stopped eating. She did try to eat, but could not keep food in her stomach. She was sick with anxiety and also nervous about possibly being with child, after Madam Pomfrey told her that the potion she wanted was illegal. When women don't eat properly, they don't have regular cycles. And she was tired because she wasn't eating, not because she was with child. It was an understandable mistake. She wasn't in the best of health, and because she was worried about it, she mistook her health problems for a pregnancy. We've got her eating properly again. It is quite certain that she is not going to have a child, nor ever was.

Harry remembered how painfully thin she'd been when he was holding her hips while they made love, how he'd thought he could probably count her ribs...he suspected that she hadn't been eating enough even before she'd

gone into hiding. Probably from anxiety. Oddly, after so much fretting about her health and the baby's health, he didn't feel relief about her not having a baby, even though he had previously been feeling an enormous amount of guilt for being responsible for putting her through all of the pain and discomfort of a pregnancy, and eventually, a birth. Instead, he now felt an emptiness in his chest, an intolerable feeling of loss, as though yet another person had died. Yet the baby had never been....

Then he realized that the mess he was in was all for nothing. *There was never a baby.* Ron had accosted him in that classroom all for nothing! And if he hadn't done that, Binns wouldn't have seen him, and his mother would still be alive....

Harry felt an overwhelming anger surge through him, and he punched his mattress in frustration, over and over and over again. Dumbledore watched him, face passive, as Harry cursed and punched, feeling no obligation whatsoever to restrain himself just because Dumbledore was here. After all, he was no longer the headmaster....

It was all for nothing!

Harry finally stopped, trying to steady his breath again, staring down at his shaking hands. He'd discovered that the dementors' proximity tended to churn up his emotions, even though they weren't in the same room. Sometimes they sent him spiraling down into depression, reliving his parents' murders from his old life, or Dudley's funeral, or Simon's, and he also had relived, dozens of times over, putting the Disarming Charm on his mother, seeing her fly backwards....

At other times he felt an irrational anger grip him, and he punched and kicked whatever he could get his hands on in the tiny cell, screaming in fury until his throat wouldn't produce any more noise, feeling like there was no one left on earth who could possibly hear him. Then he would sink to the floor, exhausted, and eventually, transfigure himself into a griffin and curl up in the corner to sleep, letting his own inner purring motor lull him, feeling far more comfortable on the stone floor in his Animagus form than when he'd tried sleeping on the lumpy, infested mattress in his human body. And in his Animagus form, he was less prone to the dreams, the same dreams he'd had the night before Dudley's funeral....

His breathing still somewhat labored, he took the parchment and quill from Dumbledore again. He shook as he wrote.

How are Jamie and Simon and my dad?

Dumbledore responded:

Jamie and Simon are in Dunoon right now, along with your stepfather. Your mother's funeral was this morning. Soon they

will be hiding with Ginny. Their teachers and classmates have been told that they will be visiting their great-uncle in Dunoon for at least a month, in light of their brother's and mother's deaths. They will actually only stay there until tomorrow. Then we will smuggle them back into the castle, so they can hide.

Harry swallowed.

They had the funeral already?

Dumbledore nodded sadly.

I just came from your great-uncle's. I am truly sorry, Harry.

Harry felt like punching something and yelling some more, but he was all done in from his earlier fit. *He'd missed his mother's funeral.* Well, he realized, no one mourning her would want to see me, would they? He thought about Jamie; her mother had died on her *fifteenth birthday*. Oh, god, Jamie, I am *so sorry....*

Harry took the parchment from Dumbledore again.

What about Ron?

Dumbledore replied:

Ron Weasley is back in Gryffindor Tower, but he will be coming to the Ministry to testify on your behalf next Thursday. He has told a story about wandering all the way through the forest to a Muggle town and being taken in by people there during the storm; he said they were so concerned over him, it was difficult for him to get away to return to Hogwarts, and he had no way to send an owl or any other communication. He said he was in a Muggle hospital. I gave him some details and names of places on the other side of the forest that lend credence to his story. No one is questioning it. Charlie is also safe. No one has contacted your stepfather to demand that he kill Charlie. The wizarding world is understandably distracted by the fact that you are going to be tried for your mother's murder.

Harry nodded, reading this. The other oddly comforting thing about being held at the Ministry was that no one was coming to him and demanding that he kill someone; he couldn't very well do that while locked in a cell with a guard and several dementors blocking his way to the outside world, not to mention the maze-like corridors he'd had to negotiate to reach his current abode. He'd tried to remember the twists and turns on the way in, but when he turned to look behind him as he walked, he discovered that a doorway through which he'd just come had mysteriously disappeared. The

corridors seemed to spontaneously mutate while one was walking through them. He knew that that was just one of the reasons why escape from here would have been impossible.

Harry handed the parchment back to Dumbledore; he had nothing to add. But Dumbledore took it from him and started scratching away with the quill once more, looking very earnest. He wrote quite a lot, then handed it back to Harry, looking very grim.

I came here today to talk to you about your decision to be tried for your mother's murder. I know you wish to have the full story known and to be vindicated, but I am worried about the ramifications of that. If all were known, you would have to implicate your stepfather either as a Death Eater or a spy, neither of which is desirable. You will need to reveal that you are not really a loyal Death Eater also. The fact that you saw some of my operatives at the Death Eater meeting could come up--and remember, two of them are Weasleys. Details of your relationship with Ginny may become public knowledge as well, which would be embarrassing for you both in the extreme. There is nothing good about this. Too much that we have built and worked for will be jeopardized by this trial. I must ask you to reconsider and let me help you to escape.

Harry read this and frowned, then took the quill back and wrote:

I won't tell about Dad or the others. I'll leave them out of it. I can work around some of these issues, but if I run, I'll look guilty. And I have something very important I must do once I'm cleared, which will be virtually impossible if I'm trying to keep one step ahead of the Ministry. I won't reveal anything that will hurt anyone, don't worry. It will be fine.

Dumbledore read this and looked more irritated than Harry had ever seen him. He scribbled so quickly with the quill that Harry had a very difficult time reading what he'd written.

This isn't just about you! There is more at stake here. Even without meaning to, you could put all of the operatives at risk.

Harry responded:

I've put them at risk? You're the one who told the Longbottoms about who you really are, and about the operatives.

Dumbledore took the parchment back.

I have taken care of that with a highly-selective memory charm. They will still remember most of what they saw and heard in the cave, so they will not be likely to suspect any missing memories. If you tell your story in court, what I have done will have been for nought. It may sound impossible, but I can help you escape.

Harry shook his head, reading this. He was tired of having a conversation in writing. "What are you going to do if I don't agree; kidnap me? You don't understand," he said. "There's something I *must* do..."

He paced again, grasping the amulet. He leaned against the wall, closing his eyes, seeing Ginny; she was sitting near a fire, alone, reading a book, then putting it down and gazing into the flames, her eyes unspeakably sad....Perhaps she'd also been just a little disappointed to learn the truth about the child, Harry thought. Or rather, the fact that there *wasn't* a child. But now that he had resolved to do whatever was necessary to fix the timelines, he was glad that there was one less thing to occupy his mind....

He turned to Dumbledore, still holding the small silver-colored basilisk. "Have you ever used a Time Turner?"

The old man looked at him shrewdly. "Once, a long time ago...but if you ask me in front of anyone, I'll deny it. And if *you* have used a Time Turner, you'd better deny it too, as they've been illegal for the last thirteen years."

Harry nodded, pacing again, feeling like the wheels in his mind were spinning too fast for the words to get out of his mouth quickly enough. "I'll bet Voldemort told Barty Crouch, Jr. to tell his dad to do that....I'll bet...." he muttered as he moved, still holding the amulet in his fist. That way, one possible method for Harry to fix things would be cut off (if it actually were possibly to go that far into the past using a Time-Turner). He wondered whether Voldemort had told the younger Crouch about the changed timelines. Was that why the Minister of Magic himself had declared that he was going to be the Inquisitor on Harry's case? Had his Death Eater son suggested it, prodded by Voldemort?

Harry turned to face the former headmaster of Hogwarts. "When you used the Time Turner, what did you do?"

Dumbledore looked away from him. "I'd prefer not to discuss it. I only went back two hours in time, and it was all for nought...." Then he looked at the troubled young man before him as though seeing him for the first time, and narrowed his eyes. "Harry--what did you do?" he breathed.

Harry swallowed and sat on the bed again. "I--I used to be an orphan....." He told Dumbledore about his father being killed, then his mother begging

for Voldemort to kill her instead of Harry, and then Voldemort trying to kill him and failing because his mother's love, her sacrifice, protected him somehow. He described how the curse had rebounded onto him, not killing him, but reducing him to a mere shadow of his former self, with no real body. "He could possess others' bodies, but only for a while. It tended to kill them. So he fell from power and disappeared from the wizarding world, and I became famous for being the Boy Who Lived. But you," he pointed at the old man, "took me to live with my aunt and uncle, my mother's sister and husband, and my cousin, and I grew up in the Muggle world and didn't know I was famous, or even a wizard, until Hagrid came to bring me my Hogwarts letter when I was eleven."

Dumbledore didn't say a word, but he was looking at Harry through blue eyes that had more life in them now; Harry could see the spark of interest there, and he plunged on with his story. "Then, at the end of my fourth year, Voldemort managed to get his body back. He started to gather his Death Eaters around him once more, and he tried to do again what he'd been doing when I was a baby: he tried to recruit me. He did it through Lucius and Draco Malfoy. But Draco turned on his father and managed to get him put into Azkaban. In that life, Draco and I always used to hate each other. Actually, we didn't exactly get along famously even after his dad went to prison, but it was better than it had been...."

Harry paused, breathing heavily; he was speaking so rapidly that he was in danger of choking from not being able to process air properly. He took a breath and continued. "Last September, when I was supposed to be getting the Hogwarts Express to school, Voldemort came to talk to me at the station. Then he threw a Portkey to me which took me to Godric's Hollow. He told me about my mum being pregnant when she was killed and told me about a spell we could do together to bring back my mother and sister. Well, not exactly bring them back--it was a spell to go back in time, to when they were both still alive. We did it; we went back to the night my parents were killed, and I heard my father die...Then I saw Voldemort about to kill my mum, and I couldn't take it. I put her under Imperius and told her to do whatever was necessary to save both of us. She promised me to Voldemort and he put an Obedience Charm on me. Then I blacked out for a while. When I came to, I was in my room at Hog's End, and I soon realized that I'd lived a different life for the last fifteen years. I still remember my old life, though sometimes it's a bit of a muddle. Sometimes things from *this* life are what's a muddle; I think the human mind wasn't meant to remember more than one life at a time...."

Harry stopped, breathless. He looked uncertainly at Dumbledore, who was staring down at his hands. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to Harry's. "What exactly are you saying, Harry?"

"I'm saying--I'm saying that I need to fix this. It's all wrong. I need to get back to that night again--"

But Dumbledore was shaking his head. "Harry--"

"You don't believe me, do you?" Harry cried hysterically.

The old man shook his head. "That's not it, Harry. Actually, what you have said makes a great deal of sense. Some of your behavior since September could *only* be explained by such a story. However, you are mistaken in your belief that you should change things back to the way they were."

Harry frowned. "Are you mad? Do you *like* this world? You quit as headmaster because they stopped letting Muggle-born students attend the school. You *know* how riddled with Death Eaters the Ministry is. And don't even get me started on the differences in the Muggle world....I can't *not* do this. It's the right thing to do."

But Dumbledore was still shaking his head. "And who are you to decide that, Harry? Would you feel the same if your mother hadn't died? She was why you did what you did, correct? What makes this world any less valid a reality than the other life you knew? This has been the world for the rest of us for over fifteen years; we have known no other. Think of the lives you'll be snuffing out, to change such a thing...."

"Think of the lives it'll save!" Harry shouted at him, getting more and more frustrated.

"Harry, Harry," Dumbledore muttered sadly. "I've traveled back in time. It's not something to trifle with. You could find yourself in a situation far worse than even your current predicament if everything does not go as you wish....Perhaps even if you restore the other timeline, since Voldemort is gathering strength again, as you say, you may find that people you care about are dead or have turned against you...You could even be dead...."

"I don't care! This--" he waved his arms around him "--was never meant to be. My own father's ghost told me I should fix it all. Who are you to tell me I shouldn't?"

"Well, Harry," he said softly. "I assume you told me all this because you wanted some sort of stamp of approval. But I'm afraid I can't give you that. I don't agree with the idea of changing timelines--"

"They've *already* been bloody changed!" Harry bellowed. "And *you're* not responsible for creating a world which is completely and utterly *buggered up!*"

Suddenly the door burst open; the guard stood there, flanked by dementors. Harry sank to his knees, his head in his hands, cold slicing through his body, screams filling his brain, despair taking over....

"What in bloomin' 'ell is all this noise?" the guard demanded. Harry struggled to raise his eyes, but he only got as far as the guard's knees. He saw Dumbledore's legs too; the old man stood, and Harry thought he heard him tucking the parchment and quill into his robe pocket.

"I'm afraid I had some distressing news for Harry and I've upset him. I should go now. And--it will probably help to keep *those* things away from him." Harry assumed that he meant the dementors. He addressed the top of Harry's head now. "I will take my leave now, Harry. I believe that your stepfather spoke of coming to visit you this Sunday. Please remember our talk. I will probably not see you again until the trial. Goodbye."

Why did I think it would do any good to tell him? Harry thought, angrier with himself more than Dumbledore. I knew what he would say; I knew he wouldn't approve....

Harry watched his feet move toward the door; when it was closed and locked securely again, he closed his eyes and felt the change ripple through his body. Once he'd made the transition to a golden griffin, the cold from the dementors started to leave him, and his mind gradually grew peaceful again. He washed his tawny coat a little with his rough, sandpaper tongue. Then, his own purring motor calming the turmoil in his mind, he curled up in a corner of his cell to sleep.

* * * * *

"Get up, you," the guard snarled, kicking Harry's leg. It felt like he was wearing steel-toed boots. Harry lay curled in the corner of his cell, having had only moments to revert to his human form when he heard the guard at the door. "Bed not good enough for ye?"

"Infested," Harry said shortly, scratching behind his ear; he wasn't completely certain some of the vermin hadn't migrated to him anyway, even though he'd been keeping as far as possible from the mattress in the small room. "Am I to be allowed to wash myself before my trial?" He hadn't had a shower since he'd been taken into custody, and even he could tell that he'd gotten quite ripe.

"It's washing ye want now, is it? First ye're too good for the bed, now ye want to wash. All right, here: *Fluvius!*"

An arc of water rushed suddenly and violently from the tip of the wand he pointed at Harry, soaking him; it was like being hosed down, as though he were an animal in the zoo. Harry spluttered, choking on some water that had gotten into his mouth. He fell to his knees, gasping.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" The water stopped. "There ye go. A loverly shower. Have I made yer day?" he chuckled. Harry noticed that when the

dementors weren't around, the guard actually smiled and laughed, although it was always at Harry's expense. Harry glared at him.

"I don't think they want me dripping wet when I'm on trial. Do you have a towel?"

"Here," he said roughly, throwing Harry the course blanket from the bed, which he suspected had as many organisms living in it as the mattress. Harry dropped it distastefully.

"Oh," the guard said in an alarmingly cheerful voice. "I almost forgot: special breakfast today. Ever' one goin' on trial gets a nice big breakfast beforehan'. You know; somethin' to remember when yer in Azkaban...."

Harry swallowed as a tray heaped with a generous breakfast came floating into the room, summoned by the guard. He had his own small pot of tea, plus pumpkin and orange juice, a rack of toast, poached eggs, sausages and kippers, and even a bowl of porridge with a small dish of currants on the side that he could add to it if he wished. For his toast he had butter, marmalade and blackberry jam. For the tea he had cream and small, perfect white sugar cubes. Should he wish that, lemon and honey if he preferred that. Or he could opt to use the honey on the toast, or in the porridge. He had gone abruptly from famine to feast.

Here was only a tiny amount of the food that appeared on the tables in the Great Hall every day of his life since starting at Hogwarts--in both lives--and yet, even though he hadn't had a decent meal since being thrust into this cell a week-and-a-half earlier, he had absolutely no appetite, and in fact, the presence of the tray of food was threatening to make him spew the meager contents of his poor, shrunken stomach.

Harry put his hand over his mouth, feeling his gorge rise. "Please go," he managed to mumble through his hand, feeling a prickling all over his scalp. The guard left the food and departed with a shrug. Harry sat in his corner again, still in human form, his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around his legs. His hair dripped onto his legs. *Oh, god, he thought. I'm going to go into court bedraggled, no comb for my hair, no proper shave, soaking wet and still smelling anyway. They just want me to appear as disreputable as possible....*

Harry blinked back tears that were threatening to send him into court with a red nose and bloodshot eyes as well. *What if I'm found guilty?* he wondered. *How soon will I be able to fix the timelines then? Will it be ten years, like Sam?*

He sat in the corner for what seemed a long time, gradually watching the rising steam dissipate from the teapot and porridge and meat and fish as the food cooled. Finally, he pushed his damp hair from his brow and felt his robes; they were drier than they had been. He tentatively picked up a

kipper and started eating it; his stomach had settled, he decided. He ate his now-cold breakfast, leaving the jam and marmalade, favoring butter on his toast, which he also topped with cold poached eggs.

As he chewed, he went over his testimony in his head again. His dad had visited him on Sunday, with another enchanted parchment, and they had written out his trial strategy in great detail, every aspect of what Harry could say and what he shouldn't say all worked out--as long as Crouch didn't catch him in a lie or trick him into saying something he'd had no intention of revealing. Harry hoped the preparation would be *for* something, that Crouch would ask the predictable questions Harry expected him to ask. He almost wished for Cornelius Fudge to be Minister of Magic; Fudge was about as original and clever as a shepherd's pie with nothing under the mashed potatoes.

Barty Crouch, Sr., on the other hand, had concocted a fiendishly-clever plan to break his own son out of prison, substituting his dying wife for the young man and then concealing his son in his house for years before Barty Crouch, Jr. managed to overcome the Imperius Curse his father had placed on him....And Crouch, Jr., was no slouch in the brains department either, having spent the better part of a year impersonating a well-known and very unique Auror and outsmarting the Goblet of Fire so that Harry would be the fourth Triwizard Champion. He'd been in Ravenclaw, Harry remembered, and he'd been a prefect. He wondered whether his father, the Minister of Magic himself, had also been a prefect in Ravenclaw. He'd probably been Head Boy, too, Harry thought. He thought again of Bill and Percy Weasley, both former Head Boys. He mustn't mention their names in the trial, either as Death Eaters (which they were just pretending to be) nor spies for Dumbledore (which they really were). He couldn't jeopardize their lives and their work. This was going to be a very delicate balancing act, and he was up against a formidable, determined man....

Harry finally took off his robes and most of his clothes, laying them out on the floor; he was damned if he was going to let them control how he appeared in court. He held out his hands toward them and whispered softly, "*Dessicatio.*" The water dissipated from the garments, and then Harry charmed them to smell like fresh-cut grass, an innocuous odor that most people did not find offensive. He put the clothes back on; he hadn't dared to do anything in front of the guard, but he'd discovered since being arrested that the extra power Voldemort had conferred upon him through the Obedience Charm made it possible for him to perform quite a lot of magic without benefit of a wand; he knew that all witches and wizards could do some wandless magic with claps of their hands or just adequate concentration, but he'd never realized that he was especially good at this because he simply had been given more power than most wizards. He thought back to the time when he was seven and he had disarmed Lucius Malfoy while lurking in the corner of his study....Most wizards had to use the Disarming Charm to do that. Of course, he thought, look where using the Disarming Charm has gotten me....

He also remembered the way he'd made the door fly open and crack at Hog's End when he'd discovered his mother in Sirius' arms. He'd thought at the time that it was just his emotions that were amplifying the magic, that he was worked-up and agitated, and his magic was similarly out-of-control as a result. He had no idea now how much of his magical ability was his own, and how much was given to him in order to carry out the orders of a dark wizard....

He did know that he had the ability to do the Animagus transfiguration in his other life, and he used this now to approximate a close shave, risking the ingrown hairs he hated, and doing his best in general to appear neat and ready for trial, despite not having a mirror or proper access to a bath. He combed his wet hair through his fingers, trying to bring some order to it. When he was finished, he sat on the stool with his hands folded, but that felt ridiculous, so he paced the length of the small chamber, back and forth, over and over, until he thought he would go mad.

Finally, the door opened; the guard stood glaring at him malevolently, looking slightly surprised that Harry wasn't a soaking mess. He had two dementors by his side. Harry swallowed and reached for the amulet. *Help me, Ginny*, he thought, seeing her in his mind's eye, lying in a narrow bed, sleeping, one hand under her pale cheek. *Give me the strength to get through this*.

He shivered and kept his head down as the dementors grasped his arms with their putrid, rotting hands and dragged him quickly down the corridor, not letting him get his feet under himself properly. His parents' death screams echoed in his mind....Cedric dying, seeing Ginny hit by the car in London....When, after numerous twists and turns, they had reached the door of the courtroom, the guard stepped forward and opened the door, and Harry entered the chamber, his head spinning from the chaotic memories evoked by the dementors.

He looked up at row upon row of faces, a sea of accusing stares. Finally, he saw in the third row, his dad, with Draco on one side of him and Uncle Duncan on the other. Jamie and Simon were not there; he was just as glad about that. He swallowed when he saw that Dumbledore, disguised as Davy, was sitting several rows up from them, and then he saw that Ron and Sirius were next to him. The Longbottoms were nearby. Why isn't Ron with my dad and Draco? he wondered.

He didn't have a chance to continue this train of thought as he was dragged to the large chair in the center of the lowest part of the room and thrust into it. Golden bonds snaked up from around the legs of the chair and bound his arms and legs to it. The dementors continued to hover over him, and Harry looked down again, shaking. He felt colder inside than he had ever been before, unsure whether anyone would stop them if, in plain sight of a chamber full of people, they pulled his face up to administer the kiss before the trial had even begun....

Someone clapped loudly, two sharp noises like gunshots, a clear nonverbal command, and the dementors withdrew, returning to the corridor and closing the door. Harry raised his head and saw Barty Crouch, the Minister of Magic, glaring back at him. He looked as Harry had never seen him in his other life; he was not merely an Inquisitor, but the head of the magical government in Great Britain, a stern, impressive and unforgiving man who had no intention of letting Harry go free. He and his dad had discussed this; Crouch did not want to lose. Harry remembered how upset he'd been about the jury letting Ludo Bagman go free; but Bagman had been a popular Quidditch player, very nearly as charismatic as Gilderoy Lockhart, and much less irritating (although even more shifty, Harry thought). Bagman had had a following; Harry wasn't the famous Harry Potter in this world. He might be the *infamous* Harry Potter, now that he was on trial for his mother's murder, but he had no following, no band of supporters other than his stepfather and best friend and the brother of his girlfriend. The assembled people in this chamber leaned forward avidly, making Harry wonder whether they thought they were going to see a hanging or something equally gruesome and spectacular.

Crouch wore immaculate robes of royal purple velvet, edged with gold braid. His hat was a perfect cone of matching velvet, with the braid starting around the bottom, then spiraling upward in two directions so that the gold overlapped and a large diamond-shaped space was created above his face. In this space was the seal of the Minister of Magic: a brilliant green snake eating its own tail was the border, with a Union Jack in the background, and superimposed upon that was a golden pyramid with the upper portion partially separated, floating above the base, and a glowing eye with rays of light emanating from it was at the top. A rampant lion and unicorn flanked the pyramid and a crown hovered above it and its eerie eye, which, Harry thought, seemed to be *moving*.

Harry looked back down at the minister's face. Crouch was glaring at him with more hatred than Harry had ever seen; it chilled his bones even more effectively than the dementors. Harry turned his head to see his jury, to find out in whose hands his fate rested. He saw eight witches and four wizards, all of whom seemed to be over the age of fifty or so; no one seemed especially young. Why were most of them women? he wondered, but not for long. *Mothers*, he thought. *I'll bet all the witches are mothers.*

He'd had no say in choosing the jury. He had no advocate, no one to speak for him. If his stepfather hadn't visited him to work out his trial strategy, he would be mounting his defense all by himself, a sixteen-year-old wizard charged with murder. As far as Harry knew, no allowances were made for age. The wizarding world was still far behind the Muggles in terms of fairness for someone accused of a crime, and Harry had found this to be a good thing when someone he knew was guilty was in the chair, when it was Lucius Malfoy. But now....

"Harry Potter!" Crouch boomed out suddenly into the silence of the packed chamber. "You have been brought before the Council of Magical Law to answer to the charge of murdering your *own mother*, Lily Evans. The Aurors who apprehended you say you confessed on the spot, yet you have refused to sign a statement to that effect and have insisted upon wasting *my* time and the time of everyone in the Ministry of Magic with this trial, instead of just--"

Crouch stopped his snide speech and looked at Harry closely. He was looking down, breathing shallowly, his nostrils flaring, as he tried to contain his anger.

"Is there something you'd like to say, Mr. Potter?" he sneered at Harry.

Harry raised his head and looked right into the eyes of the Minister of Magic, who appeared to be disturbed by this.

"May I?" he asked softly.

"Please," the Minister responded in a ringing voice. "But do speak up, else no one will hear you."

Harry turned his head and looked right at each juror, one by one. "I was *not* 'apprehended' by Aurors. No one had to pursue me. I came of my own free will, because I wanted to tell the full story of how my mother died and clear my name." He spoke clearly and simply; each word was like a single drop of water falling into a still pool. No one in the chamber made a sound, not even a rustling of robes or a creak of someone shifting their weight on the wooden benches.

"As for wasting your time and the Ministry's time--I apologize for that, Minister, but I was told that you insisted upon personally serving as the Inquisitor on my case. If you had allowed one of the other Inquisitors to do the job, I would not have been waiting ten days for my trial and I would not be wasting your time today."

Harry looked in Crouch's eyes again, and he saw a thinly-veiled fury there; then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a familiar face a few rows above the jury: Rita Skeeter. She was letting her Quick-Quotes quill roam over her parchment notebook as she met Harry's gaze. He gave her a small smile and saw her blush furiously--but continue to keep eye contact with him. *She was flirting with a sixteen-year-old prisoner on trial for murder!* he thought, incredulous. All right, I can kiss up to the press. It can't hurt to have them on my side....

But when he looked back at Crouch, he lost the small smile he'd directed at Rita. Crouch looked more determined and fearsome than the Hungarian Horntail Harry had faced in the Triwizard Tournament.

"Yes, Mr. Potter," he nodded sagely, his hat bobbing, "I did insist upon taking the case of a sixteen-year-old who murdered his *own mother*, a *former Auror*, in cold blood."

Harry started to get up, but found that he was bound too tightly to the chair and could not. "I didn't--" he started to say angrily, then stopped in frustration. He looked at the jury again. "I said I was here willingly to clear my name. May I tell the court exactly what happened?" Crouch bowed slightly and retreated to the side, sitting down on a bench next to a thin young wizard taking notes very quickly. "And may I stand to present my case? To show the respect due to the court?" Harry watched Crouch's face closely; the Minister's eyes swiveled around the chamber, gauging the crowd's reaction to this. Harry also looked around quickly. It seemed as though he had the sympathy of most of those gathered, and with a flick of Crouch's finger, the bonds were loosed from around Harry's arms, and he stood, trying to ignore the way his stomach was leaping about. *Damn kippers*, he thought, wishing he'd stuck to tea and toast for his breakfast.

But he raised his chin, moving his eyes around the chamber, speaking to every person there, trying to keep his voice steady as he pleaded for his freedom, and he attempted to justify what wizarding law said was unjustifiable: casting a spell that caused someone to die, whether or not that was the intent of the spell.

"It all began," Harry said to the chamber, "the night my father was killed by Voldemort--" Harry paused when he heard the crowd gasp at his use of The Name, but then the Minister took advantage of this pause.

Crouch jumped to his feet. "Come now, Mr. Potter! You have already been told that you are wasting the court's time! Are you telling me that you have to go back almost *sixteen years* to explain your mother's murder?"

Harry fixed him with a stern gaze. "We will waste far less time if I am not interrupted." He kept his eyes on Crouch's, and finally, Crouch sat again. He'd backed down.

"As I was saying--my father was killed by Voldemort--" more gasping "--when I was a baby, and Voldemort would have killed me and my mother, too, but what he really wanted was for me to join him when I was old enough, and he spared my life and my mother's life when she promised that I would be his servant one day."

Now Crouch laughed outright. "And why would he want to recruit a baby?" he sneered. Harry looked at him levelly.

"Because a seer told him of a prophecy concerning the fall of Voldemort, and he was convinced that I was one of the people in the prophecy who could eventually be responsible for this."

Crouch harrumphed again, laughing rudely. "You? Bring about the fall of You-Know-Who? I hardly think so. If that were so, why would he let you live?"

"It is not important whether *you* think so," Harry told him condescendingly. "It is important that *he* thought so. He is a great believer in the expression *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer*. He wanted to be able to control me and to keep an eye on me."

Harry looked up at his stepfather, who was very pale and nervous. *Don't worry, dad*, he wanted to tell him. *I won't tell them anything about you...*

"This last winter solstice," he went on, "I was finally initiated. A Portkey was sent to Hogwarts, and I used this to go to the meeting where I was to become a Death Eater." So far, technically, he had neither lied nor given away that his dad, best friend and his best friend's father were technically all Death Eaters. The lying was to come now.

"Nothing unusual occurred during the meeting; fortunately, Voldemort did not ask me to do anything illegal to prove my loyalty. That was to come later. I'd felt trapped into being initiated, and I was feeling rebellious. I wanted to do something I knew Voldemort would hate. I thought that the Board of Governors had made a dreadful mistake in banning Muggle-born students from the school years ago, so I concocted the plan for the General Strike, to force the board to rescind the ban. The strike worked, and they agreed to begin taking Muggle-born students again. But since I was, as far as Voldemort knew, a loyal Death Eater, I could not publicly lead the strike, and I convinced Ron Weasley to do it instead, since he was a prefect, and he wasn't in Slytherin. Unfortunately, after the strike was over, I received my first instructions about what I was to do as a Death Eater: I was to kill Ron Weasley, because he had organized the General Strike."

Harry looked up at Ron, who did not meet his eyes, but turned to look at Dumbledore, next to him. "I had no intention of killing him, of course, and I was feeling especially bad about his being targeted since I'm the one who thought of the strike and I'd asked him to be the public leader of it. I didn't have any ideas about how to get around it, however, and after a couple of weeks, someone--probably someone within Hogwarts--kidnapped my brother Stuart as a message to me. I was to kill Ron Weasley or something dreadful would happen to my brother."

"Well, it so happened that earlier that day was when Hogwarts was hit by that dreadful blizzard. Ginny Weasley and I were both out walking round the lake when it hit, and I lost her in the storm. I managed to find my way to the Quidditch changing rooms and took shelter there, but she never got there, and she still hasn't been found. I returned to the castle and spoke to Ron; I said that others would go out searching for her, including me, but he should take this opportunity to hide, and we could pretend that he

had gone out looking for her and was also lost. I grew up running around the castle, since my parents were teachers, and I knew about all kinds of secret rooms and passages. I knew of a place where he could hide and I could take food to him. This way, Voldemort might think Ron was dead and stop telling me I must kill him. My brother was returned, but he inherited porphyria and was already very sick; he'd been in a desert for a fortnight, which was the worst possible environment for someone with photophobia--light-sensitivity--and he was practically dead when we got him back. A few days later, he did die. Not long after the funeral, Ron came out of hiding to talk to me, and something dreadful happened: he was seen by a Death Eater, who now knew that he wasn't dead."

"Seen by a Death Eater? Where?" Crouch demanded.

"In an empty classroom."

"At Hogwarts you mean? A Death Eater at Hogwarts? I thought *you* were the only Death Eater at Hogwarts."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "There's another. A teacher."

A gasp went up from the crowd and Crouch leaned forward, his eyes narrowed as though he were daring Harry to say it. "Who?"

"Professor Binns, who teaches History of Magic."

"How do you know?" Crouch barked.

"I saw him at my initiation. I could only see two people's faces besides Voldemort," he lied, "as most people had hoods up or were hiding their identities in some way. But one of the two people I saw was definitely Professor Binns."

Harry waited for him to ask who the other person was, but Crouch grunted. "Go on."

"Soon after, I received this letter," Harry said looking up at Draco, who walked down an uneven passage between some of the spectators now, carrying the *habeus corpus* letter. Harry took it from him and handed it to Crouch, who then read it aloud for the court. When he was done, Crouch looked up from the letter.

"And?" he prompted Harry.

"Well, my mum knew about the fact that I'd been asked to kill Ron. I'd told her what had happened at the initiation and about being told to kill Ron. She had been helping me hide him, and so I took the letter straight to her. She suggested that maybe we could transfigure a dead animal to look like his body and get him out of the castle to a safe place. That

sounded like a good idea, so I went along with it. She had an Invisibility Cloak she put on Ron so no one would see us leaving the castle with him, and we were going to go to this cave in the foothills to meet a friend of hers who would take Ron somewhere safe."

"Who was this friend?"

"There was no friend. But I'll get to that. As we were leaving the castle, my best friend, Draco Malfoy came running up, wanting to know what we were doing. He couldn't see Ron, of course. I hadn't told him anything about my having to kill Ron Weasley or even being initiated as a Death Eater. My mum told Draco we were walking up into the foothills looking for some potions ingredients, and she invited him to come along. I was surprised, since I didn't want him to know I was supposed to kill Ron, *and* Ron was still alive. But I couldn't really talk to my mum about it with Draco right there, so the four of us walked up into the foothills. Draco couldn't see Ron.

"When we reached the cave and went in, Draco was wondering what potions ingredients we could possibly find there other than mushrooms, and when Ron took off the Invisibility Cloak he was completely shocked. He was even more shocked, and I was too, when my mum disarmed both of them. Turns out she thought Draco coming along was a very lucky thing, because she decided she could use him as leverage."

"Leverage?" Crouch asked, his brow furrowed.

"Well, it turned out she hadn't contacted any friend of hers. She decided that she didn't want my other brother or my sister killed just because I hadn't killed Ron Weasley, and she told me that she wanted me to get it over with, and if I didn't, she was going to torture my best friend, Draco Malfoy. I--I think Mum was still really grief-stricken over Stu. I mean, she wasn't thinking at all clearly. She was just trying to protect her children. But I'm not a murderer; I told her I wasn't going to kill Ron--I told her we'd find another way out of the mess, and I got between her and Draco so he could run out of the cave and go to get help. So then she decided that if she couldn't force me to kill Ron by threatening my best friend, she would kill him herself, so I wouldn't have to and her three remaining children would all be safe. But I couldn't let her do that either, and when she had gotten more than half-way though the Killing Curse, I disarmed her."

He paused, his voice caught in his throat. He felt like he'd been talking forever; the courtroom was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. "I--I must have been terribly worked up, because she flew backward *really* fast and hit the cave wall very hard. There was this sharp outcropping that her head hit--I think that was what did it--" He couldn't go on, breaking down now. "I never meant to hurt her, let alone kill her," he choked out through his tears. "She would have killed Ron Weasley if I hadn't disarmed her."

She was a grief-stricken mother protecting her children. She wasn't thinking straight. She wasn't a murderer at heart either--or at least, I didn't want her to be...."

Crouch gave him a moment to compose himself; he sat down on the edge of the chair, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his robe after he'd removed his glasses. When he'd replaced the glasses on his face he stood again, trying to get his breath, and found that the Minister of Magic was *smiling* at him.

"Well, Mr. Potter. That's certainly a very interesting and *imaginative* account, but it hardly agrees with what we know to be the facts of your case."

"*Imaginative!* But--"

Crouch clapped his hands and the golden bonds reached out from the prisoner's chair and pulled Harry back into it, binding his arms and legs once more. Harry struggled with bonds momentarily, noticed some jurors looking askance at this, and stopped.

"Now we will hear a slightly different version of what occurred. We will hear from--Ronald Weasley!"

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. Ron would help him--he'd already said so. Harry stopped struggling and looked at Ron, giving him a nod and a small smile. Ron, however, did not meet his eyes, but stood in his place, next to Dumbledore, visibly nervous.

"So, Mr. Weasley," Crouch began. "Is it true that during the time you were missing you were being hidden in Hogwarts castle by Harry Potter because he did not wish to kill you, as he says he was ordered to?"

"Well--I don't know whether anyone told him to kill me or not. I'd certainly be surprised if someone had to talk him into it, though. We've never exactly gotten on."

"I see. So where were you after the blizzard in which your sister disappeared?"

"Well, to really tell it right, you have to understand about Potter and my sister. He was obsessed with her, ever since I can remember. Followed her everywhere, wrote her poetry...It was a bit sick, really. She wouldn't give him the time of day. When we finally found out that Professor Evans was his mum, it all started to make sense to me...."

"How so?"

"Well, they looked a bit similar. Different eyes, but both with long red hair, about the same height...superficial similarities, really, but obviously it mattered to Potter."

Harry's jaw dropped. *What was he implying?*

"Interesting theory, Mr. Weasley. But I was under the impression that Mr. Potter was rather on the outs with his mother."

"Oh, yeah, completely. I mean, on the day we all found out about Professor Evans being his mum, the way it happened was his best friend made a comment at lunch about the way Professor Evans looked that day. I didn't hear it, but when Potter started yelling and screaming about it, it was pretty obvious the sort of thing Malfoy had said. Potter said he was especially hacked off because Malfoy *knew* she was his mum, not like blokes like Zabini, who made comments about her without knowing any better. I mean--it's just one of those codes, isn't it? A bloke doesn't talk about another bloke's mum that way. It just isn't done."

"*What* way, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron turned bright red. "You know; like a girl you fancy." He looked at Dumbledore for a moment, Harry noticed, who nodded almost imperceptibly. *He's coached him*, Harry realized. *Dumbledore's told him what to say.*

"Anyway," Ron continued, "the next thing we all know, Potter's standing in the middle of the Great Hall, telling the entire school that Evans is his mum and that she's married to Professor Snape. So she orders him to go to her office, and he gives her some lip, but he goes out, and she does too. You could tell they were going to have a terrible row--"

"What?" Harry cried. "You don't know what happened--" he started to say, unable to continue, he was so shocked. That was when he and his mother had *reconciled*. He'd told her that he *loved* her....For Ron to twist it all around like this made it all seem so tawdry. Crouch ignored Harry.

"Did Mr. Potter and his mother often have rows?"

"Well, I don't know about that. But she was often quite cross with him in Potions. Always marking him down or taking away house points."

All Harry could do was to stare at Ron in disbelief. "I see," Crouch said, pulling at his chin and pacing. "And what about your sister?"

"Well, we'd thought he'd stopped bothering her, but then he brought her to the infirmary one day last term, said he'd found her at the foot of the stairs in the Great Hall. She had really bad internal injuries that Madam Pomfrey said she couldn't have gotten from a fall down some stairs. And

Potter was suddenly there all the time, sitting with her while she was recovering."

"Hmm. So Mr. Potter is the one who found her, injured badly in a way that can't be explained by a fall down the stairs, after four years of almost constant rejection by your sister?"

"That's right."

"And what about the blizzard?"

"Well, he kind of cornered her and asked if she'd like to go for a walk. That was when we were at the end of that weird warm spell. I think she wanted to put him off once and for all, but also let him down easy. She was like that. So she went along. While they were out, the cold front moved in and it began to snow heavily. A lot of prefects and professors went out looking for them, but when the storm got too bad, we had to come back to the castle. I couldn't bear it, though. I couldn't sleep, knowing she was out there. So I went out myself, but I got a bit blown off course.

"I wound up going all the way through the forest to this Muggle village named Rhynie--a policeman found me and took me to hospital in Huntly, which is a larger town nearby. Rhynie is near Clashindarroch Forest. I heard people calling it the Clash. Apparently there are a lot of ski trails through the Clash. I think it's actually the same as our Forbidden Forest, but part of the way through the Clash, non-magical people will come up against the Muggle-repelling charms and decide to go back. Apparently, they were used to stupid tourists going skiing on the forest paths and getting lost in storms if they didn't come back to the village soon enough.

"I think it was over three weeks before they'd let me get up and walk around much. For one thing, I couldn't tell them where my family lived and where I went to school, because my parent don't have a telephone, their house isn't on the regular Muggle post-route and Hogwarts can't be found by Muggles, obviously. And even if I'd tried to tell them I'd come from a great castle on the other side of the Clash, no one would have believed me. So they thought I had memory-loss or something because I wouldn't tell them a lot of things. I didn't want to tell them my name, either, so they assumed I didn't know that either. Well, here, see for yourself."

He took what appeared to be a folded-up newspaper out of his robe pocket and walked down to hand it to Crouch, who looked at it with great interest.

"You might like to see this, Mr. Potter."

Harry took the paper in his left hand, holding it awkwardly because his arm was bound to the chair. It was a Muggle newspaper from the town of Huntly, Aberdeenshire, and there was a picture of Ron, described as a young man who'd been found by the police wandering in the blizzard near Rhynie, who didn't remember his name or school and who wanted anyone who recognized him to ring up Gordon-Huntly Hospital with the information. Harry turned over the newspaper; there were also stories about the local school, a bazaar that was held at the parish church, an argument about whether to install a traffic signal at a particular intersection in the town, something about a recent visit by the Princess of Wales (Harry did a double-take at that)....It looked completely legitimate. The problem was, Harry knew it was a fake. He started shaking; was Dumbledore going to do everything in his power to keep him from fixing the timelines? Harry couldn't believe that one of the people he'd counted on could turn on him this way....

Ron went on speaking. "Finally, I managed to find my clothes and sneak out of the back the service entrance early in the morning and go back to Rhynie and the forest. It was the twenty-fifth. I had some food with me I'd taken from the trays of the patients near me, and I kept to the edge of the Clash. Finally, I was near the foothills, and I could see Hogwarts and Hogsmeade in the distance, through the trees. I also saw something strange; it looked like Potter and Malfoy and my sister walking up into the foothills together. That seemed very odd, so I followed them at a distance. After a while, I could tell it was Professor Evans, not my sister. By then they'd seen me. Professor Evans waved her arms and yelled for help, but Potter shut her up with some kind of pain curse. I caught up with them and demanded to know what was going on, and whether my sister had ever been found. I hoped that if Potter had gotten back from the storm, maybe she had too. I didn't know yet that my parents had already held a funeral for her--and for me. Then Potter forced me to come along to the cave, too. I didn't know yet that he'd gotten Malfoy to help him get his mum up to this cave by blackmailing him. Well, his dad really."

"Blackmail?"

"Yeah. Well, you know Potter's a Death Eater. He's already said. Not that I'm surprised. He said he saw Malfoy's dad at a meeting and he made Malfoy come along to help him kill his mum or he'd send an owl with an anonymous tip about his dad to the Ministry."

Harry could not be more shocked. Ron was covering up for Draco for some reason, but trying to implicate Lucius Malfoy.

"Of course," he went on, "if I'd known that *he* came back from that blizzard but my sister didn't, I'd have known he was a cold-blooded killer and I would have been more on my guard."

Crouch nodded, but Harry finally found words. "Why are you lying? You're just making all this up! This--" he tossed the Muggle newspaper on the floor "-- is a fake, and for some reason, you're trying to frame me--"

"Do I need to put a silencing charm on you, Mr. Potter?" Crouch sounded almost bored.

Harry's head swam. This wasn't happening, he told himself, this wasn't happening....

"Then what happened, Mr. Weasley?"

"Well, inside the cave, Potter disarmed me and Malfoy. Then his mother tried to disarm him, but he managed to do her first. It is true that she died from hitting her head on the cave wall while he was disarming her. He's not lying about that part. It wasn't the killing curse."

"What do you mean 'I'm not lying about that part?' I'm also not lying about her trying to kill you and about my saving your sodding life!"

Ron looked at him dispassionately. "Where's my sister? My sister who refused you, over and over again...." he asked softly.

"You know very well--" Harry started to say, then realized that he couldn't finish. He couldn't reveal Ginny's location, or that she was still alive. He was stuck. He put his head down on his arm where it was bound to the chair. *Did Ron know that Ginny was never pregnant? Or had Dumbledore conveniently forgotten to tell Ron that?* "I didn't murder your sister," he sobbed into his sleeve. "I didn't plot to kill my mother....that was an accident....I was trying to save your life...."

He heard Crouch say to Ron, "That will be all Mr. Weasley. Thank you, and I'm very sorry for your loss." Harry lifted his head; Ron took his seat next to Dumbledore again. Crouch turned to Harry. "Well, Mr. Potter. Your story was quite fascinating. Unfortunately, Mr. Potter, it is so full of holes I don't even know where to begin. Perhaps we should hear from someone else who can shed some light on what sort of motive you might have for killing your mother...."

"*Motive?*" he whispered, alarmed. Was Crouch implying that he'd *planned* it now? That it was *premeditated*?

"Sirius Black!" Crouch called out, and Harry's godfather, who had been sitting on the other side of Dumbledore from Ron, stood now. Harry had a bad feeling about this; Sirius was also sitting with Dumbledore, and having heard Ron's tale, Harry thought he knew what to expect.

He was wrong.

"Can you tell us something about your relationship with Lily Evans?"

Sirius immediately colored deeply. "I was very much in love with Lily. For years. When she was seeing Severus Snape while we were in school, I really hated it. He and I had never gotten on. But when she started going out with my best friend, James Potter, I put aside my feelings and accepted their relationship. I was best man at their wedding.

"After James was killed, both Severus and I came round to see her quite a bit. But then he was the one who was there when she had her daughter, so he got a bit of a leg up on me. After they were married, I accepted again that she and I weren't going to be together. But then their twins were born with porphyria, and she started turning to me for friendly support more and more. In the last year and a half their relationship had become terribly strained, as they spent a great deal of their time arguing about what to do for poor Stuart, who was worse off than his twin. At some point, they decided that their marriage was basically over and although they maintained the fiction of still being happily married when they were at home, at Hogwarts they slept in separate rooms. They came to an understanding: they could each see other people, if they liked, as long as they exercised discretion and didn't let the children get wind of anything amiss.

"Well, when she told me this, I took it as a sign, and I told her that my feelings for her had never changed....Even though it was a bit embarrassing to admit to carrying a torch for a good friend for so long, I didn't mind, because she--well, she let me know she returned my feelings. We didn't want to keep this from Severus, so we told him, and he just reminded us to be careful. He didn't look thrilled, mind you, but the 'arrangement' had been his idea....

"And then--well, we were sloppy one day, and Harry saw us together at the house in Hogsmeade. We thought everyone else was out Christmas shopping....We were just holding each other--fully clothed, I might add--but Harry looked absolutely furious. Without using a wand, he made the door swing open so violently that it cracked in two when it hit the wall. And I'm talking about an old, three-inch-thick solid oak door. Then he ran off somewhere and didn't come back for hours. Severus explained their marital situation and our relationship to him when Harry returned.

"After that, Harry definitely treated me differently. I'm his godfather, and his sister's godfather, and we've always had a good relationship. Somehow....he decided to take his stepfather's side in this, instead of being glad that his mother was happy. But in a way, he didn't really take his stepfather's side; I mean, like I said, Severus wasn't thrilled, but he'd accepted our relationship. They were staying married to maintain a stable family life for the children, and because of the twins' illness."

Crouch turned a gimlet eye on Harry, who felt utterly unable to keep his distress from showing on his face. *Bloody hell*, he thought. *Are they implying that I wanted my mother myself or that I wanted her for my stepfather?* He had no words to respond to what Sirius had said. He couldn't argue veracity, since everything he was saying was true, in stark contrast to Ron's story. And the part about splitting the oak door didn't sound very good, either.

Crouch surveyed Harry for only a moment before turning back to Sirius. "Would it be safe to say that you feared for your life, Professor Black? That you worried that your godson would attempt to punish you for the relationship you were having with his mother?"

Harry struggled to get out of the bonds again, screaming at Sirius almost hysterically, "I never did anything to threaten you--"

"Well, actually--not anything specific. But all last term--he was behaving very strangely. He suddenly started displaying a number of magical abilities that none of us had known him to have before, and quickly became proficient at very difficult new spells. The news about the Patronus he conjured spread all over the school like wildfire...."

Crouch's eyebrows flew up, disappearing temporarily under his hat. "A *Patronus*?" he said, incredulous. "Someone in his sixth year in school--someone still in school at all, for that matter--conjuring a *Patronus*?"

Sirius nodded. "They were studying boggarts in Dark Arts, and Harry's turned into a dementor. As soon as it did, he conjured the Patronus, and the dementor couldn't get near him."

Crouch turned to eye Harry suspiciously again. "Interesting, *isn't it*, Mr. Potter, that when you are confronted with a boggart, it turns into a *dementor*. Even more interesting, though, is that you *already* took the pains to learn how to fight it...."

Harry was shaking. They were going to turn *that* against him? He was justifiably proud of his Patronus; and he would never forget that first encounter with a dementor on the train to Hogwarts when he was in his third year in his other life....Was Crouch going to treat every detail of his life in the last sixth months as evidence that he was a dark wizard and a murderer?

Crouch had turned back to Sirius. "Thank you, Professor Black. That will be all for now. You have been most helpful, and I am also sorry for your loss." Sirius nodded at him and sat, and Harry felt a despair deeper than anything the dementors had ever inspired in him creep around his heart and hold it still, so that he felt it was a strain for it to continue to beat.

The rest of the testimony was a blur to him; his dad stood and said many of the same things Harry had said, refuting Ron's story and claiming that Harry had confided in him about hiding Ron, and emphasizing how distraught Harry had been that he'd lost Ginny in the storm. Draco did also, denying that Harry had ever threatened to blackmail, him, and denying that his dad was a Death Eater. Crouch made a very disbelieving face when Draco said this. Harry didn't take his eyes off Dumbledore while they were speaking, glaring at him, feeling himself growing angrier and angrier. *I have to fix it! You can't stop me!*

Only--he could. He could just sit there, quiet and unassuming, appearing to all the world to be merely the elderly Hogwarts caretaker, while the things he'd done behind the scenes brought Harry's world crashing down about him.

Finally, the Longbottoms testified to being called by Sirius Black because he'd seen Lily leaving the school with Harry and Draco, and he was worried for her safety, especially after the Weasley girl, who was in his house, had disappeared. Everyone knew that Harry had been obsessed with her for years and that she had last been seen in his company. They also brought up the fact that they suspected Harry had something to do with Ginny's disappearance; their "very clever son, Neville," who had gone out on one or two dates with Ginny, had first raised this as a suspicion. Harry struggled against the bonds again.

"She never did any such thing!" he cried suddenly, unable to stop himself. Gemma Longbottom had been speaking and she looked at him now with an expression of triumph in her glittering eyes. Harry sank back into the chair again, stilled by those hateful eyes. Frank Longbottom told Crouch that they immediately Apparated to the foothills outside the village--which were not on the grounds of Hogwarts--and when they arrived at the cave and entered it, Severus Snape was kneeling over his dead wife.

"At first," he said, "I assumed that he had killed her himself. And now that we know he knew she had a lover, he certainly had a motive.... But young Mr. Potter told us on the spot that he had been the one to do it. I'm *still* not sure he isn't covering up for his stepfather...." He looked at Severus Snape with narrowed eyes, while Harry's dad turned and met Longbottom's gaze unflinchingly. "But," he continued, "it seems that Professor Snape had an alibi, and Mr. Weasley saw Potter, his friend and his mother climbing the foothills alone, and we reluctantly decided that the Professor had not killed his wife."

"So," Crouch said, frowning, "you are *absolutely certain* that Severus Snape was not an accomplice in his wife's murder in any way?"

"Well," Longbottom answered after a beat, "I wouldn't go *that* far."

"He had nothing to do with it!" Harry screamed suddenly, seeing the stricken look on his dad's face. "He loved her completely; that's why he let her go. He wanted her to be happy..." he trailed off. His stepfather looked back at him grimly, shaking his head. Harry knew he was digging his own grave....

He felt like he was waking from a dream when Crouch declared that they were in recess for the day, and the jury would hear final statements from him and from Harry in the morning, and present their verdict. This time, when the dementors came to drag him away, Harry didn't bother to try to get his feet under him; he let the tops of his shoes scrape along on the ancient stone floor, his head sagging. They threw him in his cell, and he collapsed on the floor where he'd landed.

At sixteen, he was a broken man.

* * * * *

Harry didn't even bothered to transfigure into a golden griffin. He lay on the cold stone floor, feeling drained after weeping for he knew not how long. Food had been magicked through the door some time ago; the tepid broth was likely ice cold now and the bread was probably like rock. Harry stared at it listlessly. Suddenly, he heard someone on the other side of the door, and after the bolt had been thrown back, it opened slowly.

It was Draco.

"Ten minutes," the guard said to him tersely, then locked the two of them in. Harry gazed at him through deadened eyes, and thought, *It's going to be a very quiet ten minutes.* He did *not* feel like talking.

But then, Draco moved to sit on the edge of the infested mattress, and Harry suddenly said, "Not there. Use the stool. You'll thank me."

Draco nodded and moved to the stool, which was a few feet away from where Harry was sprawled on the floor. Draco waited; Harry finally sat up and changed to a lotus position, then removed his glasses, wiped them on his robes, and replaced them. He looked up at his best friend.

"I'm totally screwed, aren't I?"

Draco smiled ruefully and nodded. "Harry--I had no idea. Why would Weasley lie that way? And the Longbottoms went along with the story...."

"Dumbledore," Harry said simply.

"Dumbledore? But--"

"He--he was afraid I'd jeopardize the other operatives. I swore I wouldn't. But--he didn't want to take any chances."

"So he *sacrificed* you that way? And Crouch was calling *you* cold-blooded."

Harry didn't tell him it was more likely that Dumbledore didn't want Harry to change time again. But he knew he still needed to do it. He just *had* to fix this horrible world....

"Draco, I want you to promise me something."

His best friend looked at him earnestly. "Anything."

"If--if I go to--to Azkaban--"

"Don't say that, Harry!"

"I'm just saying *if*....Anyway, if that happens, and then you hear of any rather *remarkable* news concerning me....promise me something...."

"...of course, Harry," Draco stuttered, and Harry saw that his best friend's eyes were shining.

"...promise me that you'll go *every day* to the cave. *Every day*. Go wearing the Invisibility Cloak, so no one will see you, and take the diary with you."

Now Draco looked less like he might cry. "The *what*?"

"The diary your dad gave you. Where have you put it?"

"It's--it's in a secret compartment in my trunk. I'm the only one who knows where it is or how to open it."

"Good. Keep it safe. And remember--you hear of any *remarkable news*..."

Draco nodded, a look of understanding on his face now. "Right. I know what to do."

Harry nodded back, fighting back his own tears now. "Right."

They sat silently, looking at each other helplessly for what seemed a long time. Suddenly, the door swung open; the guard stood there with two dementors, and Harry felt freezing cold down to his marrow....

"Time's up! Unless you want to be locked up, too!"

Draco shook his head violently and practically ran for the door, then turned suddenly. "I'll tell Jamie--I'll tell her--"

"Tell her I love her." He nodded. "And--and the other person, too. Same thing."

Draco nodded again. "Your dad and I are staying at the Leaky Cauldron tonight. He--he was in a pretty bad way. I told him I'd come see you. He wants to see you tomorrow though." The guard pulled him into the corridor, where Harry saw Draco cower before the dementors, before the door was slammed shut again.

Harry spent a horrible night sleeping in the corner. He slept as a griffin at first, but then he changed back to his human form and curled his fingers around the amulet. He closed his eyes, finally feeling some peace, and he saw in his mind's eye Ginny sitting in the dark at a castle window, gazing at the stars, her arms wrapped around her legs, a tear gliding down her cheek. Then he saw his sister approach her and sit next to her, an arm around her shoulder. Jamie was crying too, and the two friends leaned on each other, crying softly. Harry yearned after them; they seemed near enough to touch. Would he ever actually see them in person again? he wondered.

He wasn't sure when he finally dozed off, but when he awoke, the cell looked the same as ever, with the flickering light from the never-failing candle. A breakfast tray was sitting near the door, as full and groaning as the one he'd had the day before. He ignored most of it today, eating just a piece of toast with jam and drinking the orange juice. He used his Animagus abilities to 'shave' again and tried to bring some order to his hair with his fingers. He had to hope that the jury believed him and not Ron or the Longbottoms. He had to win against Barty Crouch, the Minister of Magic himself.

The door opened suddenly, and the guard grunted, "Ten minutes," as he had with Draco, the day before. It was his stepfather. Harry rose to meet him.

"Dad--" he started to say, but Severus Snape enveloped him in a fatherly hug and then held him at arms' length.

"Harry. How are you?"

Harry drew his lips into a line and assumed a stoic expression. "Fine. I'm fine." He took a deep breath through his nose and tried to look determined. "I'm ready."

His dad nodded. "I know you are." He, on the other hand, looked as though he hadn't slept at all. His eyes looked haunted and he had dark circles under them. His skin was sallow and Harry wondered whether he'd been taking his Porphyry Potion. Or whether Simon had been taking his, with his father away in London. That reminded Harry of his siblings.

"How are Simon and Jamie?" he asked shakily. "Do--do they hate me?"

His stepfather looked pained and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Jamie doesn't hate you, Harry. She understands it was an accident. And Simon--" His dad sighed. "Well--he's really not over Stu's death yet. Not that he'll ever be. This coming on the heels of Stu--he's upset with you, I won't lie. And even though that will last a while, I don't think it will be forever."

Harry nodded; if there's one thing he knew a Snape could do, it was to hold a grudge. "And you? How are you? I mean--yesterday, Sirius told the entire wizarding world he was having an affair with my mother and you were okay with it."

His dad looked grim. "Draco wouldn't let me see the *Daily Prophet* this morning. Not that I really wanted to; but I have a feeling the coverage is pretty bad."

Harry nodded. Hogwarts professors pretending not to be married, then their son revealing that they are married, then another Hogwarts professor revealing that the married couple's marriage was just a sham and he was sleeping with the wife.

"The press loves a scandal," Harry said feebly.

"Right. And what do we have here? Accidental murder, sex, a reluctant Death Eater, unexplained disappearances....Oddly enough, according to Draco, the only person who turned out looking good in the article was *you*. Pity she's not on the jury."

"She?"

"Some reporter named Rita Skeeter..."

Harry actually had the urge to laugh. Rita always was a contrary person. Trust her to make out the accused killer to be the only person in the melodrama with any redeeming qualities.

Suddenly, the door swung open again. "You," the guard said, pointing at his dad. "Out. Court starts in fifteen minutes."

His stepfather grasped his hand earnestly. "We're here for you, Harry. I know you'll do a good job."

Harry nodded, trying to find as much confidence in himself. When his dad was gone, that gave him fifteen minutes to pace aimlessly, wringing his hands and worrying over what he was going to say. When the time was finally up, the guard opened the door again and Harry took a deep breath before approaching him and the dementors. He managed to walk to the courtroom today, and when he sat in the chair, looking up at the serried

rows of witches and wizards, he laid his arms on the arms of the chair docilely, waiting for the restraints to wrap his arms, as they very shortly did.

When the Minister of Magic entered the chamber, everyone sat up a little straighter in anticipation. He stepped down the rows of seats, and when he reached the bottom, he turned and addressed those assembled.

"Most of you are here," his voice rang out, "because you wish to see justice done. We all wish to see justice done. A beloved mother is dead. A former Auror. A respected Potions professor. A woman whose late husband was killed by the very Dark Lord whom her son, her murderer, now serves." He turned to look contemptuously at Harry. "He spits on the graves of both of his parents by choosing the Dark Lord over them." He turned to the jury. "I ask you to show respect to their memories by sending their murderous son to prison, to Azkaban, for a sentence of not less than twenty-five years." He turned to Harry again. "Oh, he was clever; he didn't use an Unforgivable Curse on her. That would have been an automatic life sentence. But for killing someone with another curse, especially killing them so violently, twenty-five years is the maximum you can give him, and I ask you do to this. Send a message to the Dark Lord that his youngest servant is not available to him any longer, and the same will happen to any other Death Eaters that cross my path!"

The Minister finished with a glare at Harry, and strode over to sit next to the young clerk again. Harry gazed around the silent chamber, the echo from Crouch's speech fading away. He lifted his chin, trying to look confident and feeling his stomach doing flip-flops inside him. He swallowed once, then began, softly at first, then growing in both confidence and volume.

"I did not choose to be initiated as a Death Eater, and I never served Voldemort in that capacity. The only thing he asked of me I refused to do: kill Ron Weasley. To protect him I needed to disarm my own mother, and in so doing, she was accidentally killed. I mourn my mother; I mourn my brother. I am torn up inside knowing that I am causing my dad and sister and brother to go without both of them because I would not kill another person. But I am still not a murderer. This happened because I refused to let Voldemort turn me *into* a murderer.

"Sometimes we must make difficult choices when we are resisting evil; I didn't know what would happen by my refusing to kill Ron Weasley, and I do not know whether I would do everything the same if I did know what would happen. I acted on my conscience and did what I felt was right. I never set out to hurt anyone. I was trying to save a life, not take one. I only hope that that will be taken into consideration. And I know that there are probably loyal Death Eaters who have already told Voldemort that I was never his true servant. I am a target now. But that is not what is

important. If we each did only what was expedient, did what was necessary to save ourselves, the world would be...."

He stopped and looked around the quiet chamber. *The world would be as this world is*, he realized. A world that resulted from his telling his mother to be selfish, instead of letting her do what she knew to be necessary: sacrificing herself.

The silence lengthened as they waited for him to finish. He looked his stepfather in the eye and saw strength and support there; he drew on that and took a deep breath. "The world is a troubled place. And it can seem like doing any one small thing does not matter at all. But sometimes it is the smallest thing that matters the most. All that is necessary for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing. I can't remember where I read that now, but I thoroughly believe it. I still believe that my mother wasn't evil; but she was feeling driven to do something that was, and I chose to stop it, to stop her. I'm not sure that you can say that a man *is* good who would just let such a thing happen. I'm not a philosopher; I'm just a boy, really. I'm still trying to learn to be the best wizard and the best man I can be. I'm lucky enough to have a great dad to help me do that," he smiled at his stepfather. "I just wish I still had my mum to help me, too."

He stopped, turning his head to look at the jury. Two of the witches were dabbing at their eyes with hankerchiefs, and one of the wizards was looking a bit red about the nose and eyes, but trying to look stern and headmasterish. Harry wondered whether they were on his side. To win, he needed a simple majority. Seven out of twelve had to vote to acquit. For Crouch to win, he needed a three-fourths majority: nine out of twelve voting to convict. It was the only real advantage the accused had, that the prosecution had to get two more jurors on their side to win. If only eight voted to convict or only six voted to acquit, there would have to be a new trial with a new jury.

Crouch looked at him malevolently and stood. He turned to face the jury. "You heard the testimony yesterday, and our statements today. You had a chance to discuss the case together. The time for discussion is over. It is time to present the verdict."

The witch in the front row on the left looked nervous, even more so when she realized Crouch was staring right at her. She swallowed and stood shakily. "I find the defendant--guilty of accidental murder by magic."

Crouch nodded at her and the wizard next to her stood next. He found Harry guilty as well. The next witch also found him guilty, and after her it was one of the two who were looking sympathetic to him....

Her voice shaking, she said, "I find the defendant--not-guilty of accidental murder by magic."

Harry felt for her; she cowered under Crouch's glare. The next witch stood and voted to convict. Then the wizard who was looking red-eyed said "not-guilty" as well. Then Harry's heart was in his throat as the next witch also pronounced him not guilty. That was four to convict and three to acquit. The next wizard also said guilty. *Come on*, Harry thought at them. *Two more of you...just two more....*

Finally, it was eight to convict and still three to acquit. Harry could hardly breathe; the best he could hope for now was to have to do this all over again, another trial....

The wizard stood. He was middle aged, maybe his dad's age, with some grey hair streaking through his unkempt long dark brown hair. His robes looked stained and worn, fraying at the edges. Then Harry's eyes opened wide; he recognized him. He'd been at the ceilidh in Hogsmeade, wearing the MacGregor tartan, like him. It was Mundungus Fletcher. Harry looked at Dumbledore and braced himself.

"I find the defendant," he said shakily, "guilty of accidental murder by magic."

Harry struggled to breathe. This couldn't be happening. He was being convicted of killing his mother. He was going to go to Azkaban for *twenty-five years....*

Crouch was beaming; he took something out of his robe pocket; Harry recognized it as his mother's wand. "Do you know that this is, Mr. Potter?" Harry nodded, knowing what was coming. "You are hereby officially expelled from Hogwarts." He grasped the wand firmly in both hands and then, with an effort, he snapped it in two. A red feather peeked out from the jagged break. Harry felt like weeping, even though it wasn't really his wand.

"But it was an *accident!*" he cried, unable to stop himself. Crouch rounded on him where he still sat, bound to the chair. He had won the case; he no longer bothered to look amiable for the sake of the juror or the press.

"An *accident* you say," he drawled lazily, drawing out the word as though it were patently ridiculous that anyone should believe it. "You were saving the life of a boy with whom you've never got on, who didn't like you following his sister about--a girl who was first mysteriously injured when you were in the same vicinity, and then who disappeared when she was out for a walk around the lake with *you*. And the mother with whom you did not get along was supposedly trying to kill the brother of the girl with whom you were obsessed, a girl who bore a remarkable resemblance to--*your mother*. And you were *very, very* upset when you saw your mother with your godfather, and practically killed them both with that oak door!"

"I did no such thing! The door didn't come near either one of them. You've twisted everything!"

Crouch turned to the jury. "It is time for the sentence. Remember my recommendation." His voice could cut diamonds.

Harry watched the jury huddle together, gesturing and nodding or shaking their heads. Would they give him the maximum time? How long would it be before he could set things right?"

Finally they settled into their seats again, and the first witch stood once more. "We have decided on the sentence. For the accidental murder of his mother, Lily Evans, Harry Potter is to be sentenced to not less than five years in Azkaban prison in solitary confinement, to protect him from possible reprisals from Death Eaters."

Five years! Harry breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't as good as an acquittal, but it was better than the twenty-five that Crouch had requested, and the ten years that Sam had gotten.

Crouch, however, was livid. He behaved as though he had lost the case. "*Five years!*" he practically squeaked. "Why don't you just send the boy on a trip to the Azores and say, 'Mind the sun, you don't want to burn?'"

"But--" Harry began, not knowing what he was going to say. Then suddenly, he saw him, sitting in the very top row, and Harry knew; he knew what to use to bargain for his freedom. Karkaroff had done it, and gone free. He could too. "What if--" he said loudly "--what if I can give you the identity of the other Death Eater I saw at the meeting when I was initiated?"

Crouch stopped and stared at him. "We already know, boy. You say you saw Binns, not that I believe that, and Malfoy, which I *do* believe."

Harry shook his head. "I wasn't talking about Malfoy. I was talking about someone else. Someone with access to the innermost workings of the Ministry of Magic."

The Minister looked very, very interested now. "*Really?*" he breathed, pacing in a circle around Harry. "And who is this other Death Eater?"

Harry nodded his head at the man in the high far corner of the chamber.

"Barty Crouch, Junior."

Under his straw-colored hair the younger Crouch paled, but his father did not notice. The Minister went vivid purple. "*How dare you--*" he struggled to say, shaking and quivering in his rage. The room had erupted in chaos; voices bounced off the stone walls, everyone was talking and shouting at

once. It was complete mayhem. Crouch went to the door leading to the cells. "Guard! Come here and bring support!" He strode back to Harry and leaned over him. "He'll get what he deserves from me, if he won't get it from the jury!"

Harry looked around with wild eyes, wondering what was going on. His stepfather was standing up amid the jostling crowd, looking like a panther ready to pounce. Crouch returned to the chamber, the guard following him, and two dementors trailing. Harry tried to pull his arms and legs free of the chair, shaking all over. *No, he thought. He wouldn't. He can't...*

Cold permeated his body down to his bones. One of the dementors grasped his head and tipped it back while the other began to bend over him. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and his mouth; he would have closed his nostrils against the reek of the unearthly creatures if he knew how. There was a roaring in his ears of people in agony--his mother, his father, Cedric Diggory--even louder than the roaring of the unruly crowd in the chamber, and suddenly, above the cacophony, he heard a familiar voice, a powerful voice that cried with authority, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

Harry opened his eyes, seeing the dementor alarmingly close to him, and then he saw, emerging from his stepfather's wand and moving swiftly toward the dementors, a silvery shape. A number of silvery shapes, actually, but functioning as one creature, driving the dementors back, sending them out of the room, away from Harry.

His dad's Patronus was a flock of bats. They beat their wings and made as much noise as a real flock would have, wheeling around the dementors' hooded shapes and hounding them until they were no longer a threat to Harry. His stepfather stepped down the serried rows and was at Harry's side in a trice, crouching next to him, looking at him with concern.

"Are you all right, Harry?" he said, and Harry had to strain to make out his words; the chamber hadn't yet come to order. Voices bounced off the stone walls, ricocheting like bullets, while clusters of witches and wizards huddled here and there and everyone seemed to be talking at once and gesticulating wildly. Harry nodded, suddenly incredibly tired.

"Thanks, Dad," he said simply, giving him a limp smile. Severus Snape nodded too and tried to smile back, but he still looked quite grim. He stood, and suddenly, Crouch was standing very close by.

"Get the guard," his dad said to the Minister of Magic as though he were one of his first-year students. "You come, too. Together we will see Harry safely back to his cell. I don't want any more dementors anywhere near him. Is that understood?"

Crouch practically had smoke coming out his ears. "Look here, you can't conjure a Patronus in a court of---"

"And you can't afford the bad press you're about to get," Severus Snape informed him, gesturing with his head to the row of reporters above the jury. "It's going to be all over the domestic *and* foreign wizarding press that you set dementors on a *sixteen-year-old boy*. In front of a packed courtroom. And another thing--I advise you to take what he said about your son very, very seriously."

Crouch's jaw dropped. "But--but he--" He couldn't continue; Harry knew from the expression on his face that Crouch hadn't erupted because he doubted what Harry had said, but because had suspected it was true for some time, and he couldn't tolerate the truth being uttered for the first time in public, in a way that could completely humiliate him and possibly end his career.

"Handle it right, and it won't hurt you," his dad said to Crouch softly. "Do what you just did--fly off the handle--and the Ministry will be in chaos. We won't have a magical government any more. We all need you to keep your head about you right now. Can you do that?"

Crouch stared at the man he knew only as the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts. He didn't know Severus Snape had recruited his son to be a Death Eater when they were both still teenagers. He didn't know this man had been a spy for over fifteen years. But he evidently did know sense when he heard it.

Harry was released from the chair and hustled out the door and down the corridor between his dad, Crouch and the guard. When he was back in his cell, his dad asked to be allowed to talk with him for a few minutes, and the door was closed again with the two of them inside.

Harry looked at his dad, trying not to break down. "I'll--I'll be all right," he said shakily. "They only gave me five years. That's--that's not too bad," he finished weakly.

"I'll write to you regularly, and send you whatever I'm allowed--books, photos--"

Harry nodded. "Thanks. And thanks for--" But he couldn't finish. He couldn't adequate describe the relief that had flooded through him upon hearing his dad cry out the incantation to conjure the Patronus. And considering what a burden his stepfather felt his disease was, and how irksome it had been when people had teased him about being a vampire, it was a very interesting form his Patronus took.

"Thanks for everything," he finally said. They embraced once more, and then his stepfather went to the door and pounded on it authoritatively. It opened and with another look over his shoulder, his dad was gone. Harry had not received the dementor's kiss, but he *would* be going to live with dementors now.

Harry Potter was going to Azkaban.

* * * * *

*For he himself had said it,
and it's greatly to his credit,
that he is an English-man!
That he is an English-man!*

*For he might have been a Roosian,
a French or Turk or Proosian,
or perhaps Italian!
(Or perhaps Italian!)*

*But in spite of all temptations
to belong to other nations,
he remains an Englishman!
He remains an Englishman!*

*For in spite of all temptations
to belong to other nations,
he remains an Englishman!
He remains an Englishman!*

Harry changed back into his human form and dragged himself over to the door to his cell. Unlike the cell far underground at the Ministry of Magic, his Azkaban cell had a small barred opening in the upper part of the door, and the door was actually opened whenever food trays needed to be passed in and out--no magicking the food about was done here, since the guards were dementors, not wizards. There were also two high windows that allowed Harry to see the sun during the day (as much as anyone ever saw the sun in early March in the islands northeast of Scotland) and the moon and stars at night. That was all the illumination he had at night; no everlasting candles burned here. There were no torches in the corridors; when the dementors patrolled, they didn't need light, since they could not see. Thus, when the sun went down, Harry could no longer read. Often he had to eat his evening meal in half-darkness.

The advantage to the barred windows in the doors was that they allowed sound to travel from cell to cell; adjacent prisoners could sometimes engage in conversation (if they hadn't already been driven into madness by the dementors; Harry was told that a number of prisoners spent all day every day curled in balls in the corners of their cells, gibbering incoherently).

The disadvantage to the door windows was that they did not just allow conversation to be exchanged between less-brain-damaged prisoners, they also allowed something like music to flow from the cell across the corridor from Harry's, where a middle-aged wizard with long light-brown hair who insisted on being called Buttercup (and who refused to admit to

having any other name) also insisted upon singing constantly. His repertoire consisted almost entirely of Gilbert and Sullivan tunes, executed off-key in a kind of baritone. When he attempted to sing the running eighth-notes that articulated the first syllable of the word "Englishman," it turned into a complete muddy mess, until he slid into the final syllable and sang the note forth as though he were trying to reach the back row of a packed music hall. The note was extremely wobbly, with far too much vibrato.

"Shut the hell up, Buttercup!" Harry bellowed at him for the fourth time that day. Truth to tell, Harry sometimes was rather glad to have the diversion of Buttercup's singing to pass the time. He seemed to know every song in every Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. Harry found it difficult to concentrate on any of the books his stepfather had sent him, and he hungrily reread the letters from him and Jamie and Draco and (unsigned ones) from Ginny far too many times, so that even relatively new letters were threatening to disintegrate.

When Harry, sitting in a small launch with his wrists bound behind him, had first seen the cliffs of Azkaban rising up out of the North Sea, he had trembled with apprehension and promptly had to lean over the side to spew into the dark water. An Auror he'd never seen before (a thirtyish man with dark hair, a beard and a Welsh accent) sat next to him in the bow, while a dementor sat behind the two of them and a young blonde woman who was also an Auror rode in the stern of the boat and was actually operating the small Muggle-made motor and steering the vessel. No magic was used. As the dreaded destination approached, he never imagined that his daily life would be most defined by a fellow prisoner's bad singing.

He'd tried to have a conversation with the Auror next to him on the launch, figuring it would be some time before he would be able to talk to anyone again.

"So," he'd said, trying not to tremble from the cold the dementor induced in him. "We left from Banff. Is that the nearest town to the prison?"

The Auror turned to him suspiciously. "Why do you want to know what's close to the prison? Banff *isn't* especially close, as a matter of fact. Fraserburgh's closer, or the Broch, as it's called. But there's more wizards in Banff; half the town, roughly. We have our own jetties where we can set off for Azkaban, the Orkneys or the Shetlands; anti-Muggle charms surround our part of the marina, so the Muggles don't see the dementors and start asking questions...." Harry nodded, but he didn't know where else to take the conversation, so he sat quietly for the rest of the choppy trip.

When they entered a cave at the base of the cliff, Harry had turned around to look for the Scottish coast, but it was shrouded in mist and

impossible to see. The motor was turned off now and the vessel was allowed to drift down a long meandering passageway lit by torches, not a sound to be heard but the gentle slapping of water on wood, before the launch grounded itself on a sandy bank and he was guided out and made to climb the interminable steps up to Azkaban fortress.

The Aurors left him when they were at the top, and Harry panicked, left alone finally with nothing but dementors. But they didn't try to administer the kiss; they dragged him into the topmost section of the prison where the lifers were (since he was to be in solitary, and usually only lifers were in solitary). Another dementor was standing outside his cell with the door open, waiting, and Buttercup was singing lustily in a trembling falsetto:

I'm called little Buttercup, dear little Buttercup, though I could never tell why.

But still I'm called Buttercup, poor little Buttercup, sweet little Buttercup, I.

When the dementors had removed his wrist restraints, thrown him into his cell and locked the door, Harry had eventually ventured back to the door to try to get to know his neighbor, who was now on a different song:

*Behold the Lord High Executioner!
A personage of noble rank and title.*

*A dignified and potent officer,
whose functions are particularly vital.*

*Defer, defer, to the Lord High Executioner!
Defer, defer, to the noble Lord, to the noble Lord,
to the Lord High Executioner!*

"Um, hello?" Harry had said timidly. His head felt like it was going to explode; the screams of his parents dying in his other life were only just starting to wane a little (this only happened when the dementors moved far enough away), but Harry thought he might regain his equilibrium more quickly if he could have an intelligent conversation with someone. "Er," he said, "my name's Harry. What's yours?" He peered through the barred opening, looking at the corresponding opening across the corridor, but over to the left a few feet; they weren't lined up precisely. Probably on purpose, Harry thought.

Suddenly, the prisoner across the corridor went roaring into the "Buttercup" song again, his falsetto even louder than before. Harry tried to get a word in edgewise, to no avail. He decided that the other prisoner had clearly gone barmy from being exposed to the dementors for too long, and Harry sank down onto the cold flagstone floor, his head in his hands as his neighbor swung into a new song:

*When a felon's not engaged in his employment
(his employment)*

*or maturing his felonious little plans
(little plans)
his capacity for innocent enjoyment
('cent enjoyment)
is just as great as any honest man's
(honest man's).*

"Hello!" Harry tried to call again, above the noise. There was sudden silence. Harry thought he might actually be ready to talk, so he stood and spoke through the window in the door again. "I said," Harry repeated slowly and clearly, as though the man were from another planet (and perhaps he was), "what is your name?"

A pause. Harry wondered how long he'd been in prison, and whether he'd forgotten this. After a few minutes of silence, Harry decided that he wasn't going to get an answer, and he decided to lie down on the miserable thin mattress on the pallet that served as his bed. Just as his head hit the flat pillow, the voice drifted into his cell from across the corridor again, very lilting and sweet now....

I'm called little Buttercup, dear little Buttercup, though I could never tell why.....

Harry gave up. The next morning, he had taken his breakfast tray from the dementor who had handed it to him through the open doorway and sat on the edge of his bed to eat, hearing the singing prisoner begin again:

*Things are seldom what they seem,
skim milk masquerades as cream.
Highlows pass as patent leathers,
jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers....*

Harry groaned and put his tray on his mattress then went to the door, yelling irritably through the opening, "Shut up already, Buttercup! Can't a person eat breakfast in peace around here?"

Suddenly, it was quiet, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief, sitting down to eat again. Without warning, a *speaking voice* was heard saying, "About time."

Harry hesitated. Was that who he thought it was?

"What's about time?" he finally answered.

"About time you called me by name. I told you as soon as you arrived."

Harry started to smile, but then he felt a coldness sweep into the small room, and through the door opening, he saw that a dementor was passing

by; they patrolled the corridors every half hour or so, making sure the prisoners received a steady dose of misery from their presence. He ducked his head down and tried to take deep breaths, waiting for the sensation to pass before attempting to eat any more, so he wouldn't be sick.

After about three weeks in prison, Harry was developing a routine, which included transfiguring himself into a golden griffin whenever he felt the dementors approaching, so he wouldn't be as affected by their presence. The other part of his routine was trying to have conversations with Buttercup, who still seldom spoke, especially if the dementors were anywhere nearby.

Buttercup stopped singing the "Englishman" song and there was quiet for a few precious moments. Then he started in on another one of his [favorites](#):

*A wand'ring minstrel I, a thing of shreds and patches,
of ballads, songs and snatches, dreamy lullaby!
My catalogue long, through ev'ry passion ranging,
to your humours changing I tune my supple song!
I tune my supple song....*

"Why is it, Buttercup," he asked grumpily, "that the rest of us in here are miserable as hell, and you can still sing merrily all the time, day in and day out?"

The singing stopped. Harry waited. And waited. He opened his mouth to ask his question again, but suddenly, Buttercup's spoken voice was heard.

"What makes you think I'm singing merrily? What makes you think I even like to sing?"

Harry frowned, perplexed. "What?"

He heard Buttercup sigh. "Those damn dementors sucked all good thoughts out of me ages ago. All that's left are my most miserable memories. My dad was a Muggle. He was an itinerant actor, went town to town looking for every damn Gilbert and Sullivan company in the British Isles. I heard these songs in my nightmares while I was growing up. Mum was a witch, and traveled with us; she loved the theatre, and my father's profession. Thought it was very exciting. She also figured that if she wasn't in the same town or even around the same people in the same acting company for an extended period of time, they wouldn't catch on to any peculiarities about her, if she was a little careless now and then about her magic. I was never so glad in all my life as when I received my Hogwarts letter and I could get away from the infernal noise of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. And now...now this shit is all I have left."

This was the largest number of spoken sentences Buttercup had put together since Harry had arrived. He didn't know what to say. It occurred to him to ask Buttercup to sing something, but he quickly realized that actually wouldn't be very kind. He wanted to know other things about him, like what house he'd been in and what classes he'd liked, and what he'd done to wind up in solitary in Azkaban....but soon the singing started up again, and Harry lost his chance.

He spent much of the day curled up in a corner as a golden griffin; he was starting to become quite a lump, he thought, but although he had exercised in the holding cell at the Ministry, since arriving at Azkaban, he hadn't felt motivated enough. I guess you have to feel more cheerful to exercise, he thought.

In the middle of the day, the dementors came round delivering mail that had arrived in Banff by owl that morning, after Aurors had checked through it all for any contraband or illicit information. Harry had a letter from his dad; he unrolled the parchment and glanced absentmindedly at the letter that was meant for the Aurors' eyes, innocuous stuff about the school, then turned it over to read the real letter. His dad always charmed the parchment so one side could only be read by him and Harry, and the Aurors always thought it was blank on that side.

Dear Harry,

I don't know how to say this, so I'll just do it straight out. Jamie and Ginny have both been killed and Simon is in St. Mungo's. We had Jamie's funeral yesterday; I wanted to have you here and I asked for permission to bring you to Dunoon, but I was denied. It was just me and Draco and Duncan.

Simon found the passage that Ron Weasley had used to go down to that classroom--he was feeling cooped up. He and Jamie had been hiding with Ginny for a while. Binns caught him out and put him under Imperius, took him back up to their hiding place. When he discovered Jamie and Ginny, he killed both of them, then put Cruciatus on Simon. Albus arrived then and stunned Binns, but not before Simon was too far gone. He's got irreversible brain damage. After Albus wormed the story out of Binns, he killed him. It almost made me like him again. I feel I was a fool to trust him to continue to hide Ginny and Jamie and Simon; I should have known he had his own agenda after your trial. I feel that Albus and I have had a permanent parting of the ways.

I am going to try to find a safe place to go with Draco and Charlie; they are the only ones I trust now, and Charlie is as appalled with his brother's trial testimony as I was. We will probably not be able to get away immediately, but we will do

it soon. It may be difficult to continue to write to you for a while. Please don't worry about us; I will communicate as often as I can once we are in a safe place. We think about you every day.

Love,

Dad

Harry stared at the letter, his eyes glazing over with pain.

Ginny dead.

Jamie dead.

Simon permanently damaged.

And soon, Draco would be in hiding. Harry's heart was in his throat. He'd never felt more sure that this world was a mistake, but he couldn't bear to think of trying to fix it....It would be so difficult....

Of course it will be difficult, said a voice he still occasionally heard in his brain. No one said it would be easy...

But Draco....soon Draco would be somewhere else, and he wouldn't be able to come to the cave to meet Harry if he managed to escape. He had to do something *now*, before it was too late....He couldn't wait until he'd served his five years.

He had hoped all along to escape and get Draco's assistance in fixing the timelines, but he had thought he would need more time to get adjusted to the Azkaban routine and work out the best way to make his escape. *It has to be now, today.*

He grasped the basilisk, as he hadn't for days, and realized that it no longer warmed his hand and gave him a mental image of Ginny; instead, his hand held hard, cold metal, almost like ice, and he had no image in his mind at all. She was gone. She was really gone....And Jamie too....

A despair like that he had never known gripped him and he gave himself over to a good cry; the despair deepened when dementors passed. Eventually, he fell asleep, and he didn't wake until he heard the dementors opening cell doors to deliver the evening meal. The sun was just beginning to set, and he would be eating in the dark again.

Then he realized that he wouldn't.

I'm not staying for dinner.

He changed into his Animagus form and stood near the door, waiting, waiting....

When the door opened, and the dementor entered, he slipped out into the corridor as Sirius had said he'd done, in his other life. The dementors did not detect the mind of the animal as he trotted past them and out the door onto the unforgiving rock of Azkaban. He turned to observe the stern prison, the dark shapes of the dementors flitting here and there, carrying food trays, their sick, rotting hands protruding from the sleeves of their cloaks. He turned away from them again and looked to the west and south. The sun was gilding the horizontal, scudding clouds that drifted in the pinkish sky, and in the distance, Harry thought he saw a greenish-purplish line on the horizon that could be the Scottish coast. It was now or never. He felt he would probably never again get up the nerve to do this, and if he waited too long, he wouldn't be able to find Draco....

Spreading his wings, he leapt off the cliff and fell for a few moments before moving his wings back and forth, back and forth, rising through the chilly sea air and building momentum. As he moved forward, he kept his griffin's eyes on the dark line on the horizon that was the northeast coast of Scotland, and flew toward the setting sun.

Chapter Fourteen

The Importance of Draco Malfoy

Harry flew toward the light. He did not know how long he had been flying; it seemed forever that he had been able to see nothing but the sea below and the stars above. He had learned early on not to stare down at the sea as he flew; watching the surface wrinkle and smooth, wrinkle and smooth, with the occasional white froth forming at the lip of a wave had proven to be nearly hypnotic. He had come very close to having the sea above him rather than below him. Harry could not look behind, so he was uncertain whether Azkaban fortress would still be visible to him if he did. He had been encouraged when he began to see a weak glow emerge from the mist that shrouded the coastline, and as it grew stronger, he prayed that he would soon be able to set down and rest his weary limbs, as he had never flown so far and so long non-stop.

At last, he could actually see the source of the glow; a lighthouse, close by what appeared to be a small castle with *another* lighthouse, albeit a dark one, perched on the roof. He was far enough away yet that the lighthouse and castle looked very small, like toys. He could see numerous fishing vessels moored near a concrete wall in tidal waters, everything from deep-ocean trawlers to open skiffs. He could dimly discern streets radiating out from the harbor, dark-hued stone houses lined up along the avenues like soldiers, their tile roofs dusted with snow like sugar on so many gingerbread houses. The town was dark and lifeless.

It must be the middle of the night yet, Harry thought. He'd taken off at sunset, but he had no idea how far it was from Azkaban to the coast, and he'd never measured his flight speed. He decided to aim for the small castle with the disused lighthouse on the roof, as it offered a large, flat surface where he could alight, and he reckoned there would be a smaller chance of Muggles suddenly appearing and being alarmed either by seeing a golden griffin or seeing a golden griffin turn into a sixteen-year-old boy.

Harry thought he would weep for joy when the castle was below him and he could finally begin his corkscrew spiral downward, preparing to land. The moment his paws touched down on the roof, he collapsed and changed to his human form again, breathing heavily, feeling dehydrated and completely drained of energy. He rolled over and stared up at the sky, the cold air chilling him, but it was a chill he welcomed, as it wasn't from dementors. He felt he would never mind mere cold weather ever again, as long as he never had to get near another dementor.

Finally, he struggled to his feet and went to the parapet to peer out at the sea, in the direction from which he'd flown. Did the dementors know he was gone? Had they sent an owl to the ministry yet? His eyes drifted down to the fishing vessels again; there seemed to be no pleasure craft here, just commercial boats, and all of the moorings were slack. The tide was low, and he could see that if the mooring lines hadn't been as long as they were, the cleats would have been torn out of the decks of the smaller wooden boats, while the larger vessels would have been hanging above the water. The beach was encrusted with snow yet; spring came late to this part of Scotland. Gulls were huddled in masses on the rocks, which were strewn with black seaweed, and in the distance he thought he heard a lone seal bark.

He leaned on the wall for a bit; the wind stirred his hair and he drank in the bleak beauty and solitude of the seaside at night, feeling as though it were created just for him. He took a deep breath of sea air, the air of freedom. He'd done it. He'd escaped from Azkaban! Then, just as quickly, he felt a lurch in his stomach as he remembered what had goaded him to action: *Jamie and Ginny are dead. Simon's in St. Mungo's*. Suddenly, the beach looked barren and cruel instead of beautiful. He felt tears prickle behind his eyes and he swallowed large gulps of cold air, willing himself not to cry. This is no time for wallowing, he thought....

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind made his teeth chatter in his head and he sneezed. Harry decided that he should find a place indoors to spend the balance of the night. He walked back to the lighthouse pavilion sprouting from the roof of the small castle and tried the door. There was a lock, but it didn't seem to be a complicated one. He concentrated very hard and put out his hand toward the knob, then cried, "Alohomora!" The door immediately opened toward him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He entered and closed the door behind him, glad to be out of the wind. Looking around, he decided that this must have been the lighthouse for

quite a long time, before the modern one was built alongside the castle, producing the light he had followed.

Spiral stairs led him down into the castle proper, but he didn't expect the sight that met his eyes; the castle wasn't someone's home, it was a kind of museum. Pictures of lighthouses were everywhere, and small scale models of lighthouses. He wandered the corridors, squinting at the photographs, mystified. He went down more stairs, at last reaching the ground floor, where he found a large open lobby with more pictures and models of lighthouses, and some glossy brochures which proclaimed him to be in the *Museum of Scottish Lighthouses*. Well, that certainly explained a lot. He tried the door, but it was securely locked. He took a deep breath and held out his hand again, using the same incantation as before; the door opened for him as the other one had, but with a difference.

Bbrrrrrinnnnngggg! Bbrrrrrinnnnngggg! Bbrrrrrinnnnngggg!

This time a loud alarm bell started ringing, making Harry practically jump out of his skin.

Damn! This door had an alarm on it. Why hadn't the other door had an alarm? *Stupid prat*, he called himself. *How many people are going to break in by landing on the roof?*

Bbrrrrrinnnnngggg! Bbrrrrrinnnnngggg! Bbrrrrrinnnnngggg!

For that matter, he thought, who the hell was going to break into a lighthouse museum in the first place? Why did they even need to have a damn alarm on the place? But he didn't think this for long; he set off toward the beach, running as fast as he could, wishing he had kept up with his exercising while in Azkaban. The alarm kept sounding behind him, and he hoped that whatever law enforcement the town possessed, they'd assume that someone setting off the alarm would either be in the museum or running toward the town, rather than the beach. It was difficult to run in the unpredictable combination of sand, snow, ice, rock and seaweed, and finally, he ran up a scrubby hill. At the top, he found himself suddenly standing on meticulously manicured grass. Staring at the rolling landscape before him, he realized that it was a golf course. He continued running, this time on the kinder surface of the short grass, which only had a little snow here and there.

At length, he had left the golf course and the noise of the museum alarm, continuing along a paved avenue, which, he realized, could have cars coming toward him at any second. He veered into a copse of trees and when he finally emerged from them, he saw small, regular rectangular shapes before him. He stopped, crouching, trying to get his breath. His lungs felt frozen. After a minute of staring at the regular shapes, he realized where he was; it was a caravan park. He shuddered; even to someone who'd been out in the cold March air longer than a sensible

person should have been, it seemed a very cold place to live, in a caravan on the northeast coast of Scotland.

He wandered up and down the quiet lanes of the park. The caravans were all up on stilts, some with neat metal skirts around the bases and even well-tended gardens and lawn furniture outside, while others were in a state of disrepair and sporting numerous lines with washing waving exuberantly in the sea breeze. One particularly dilapidated dwelling caught Harry's eye; a piece of wood had been used to mend a broken window, and a metal door flapped in the wind, banging repeatedly against the wall. The letter box at the end of the walk leading to the door was rusted and empty, and on the side it said, "John MacLeod" in chipped gold paint on black. Harry walked tentatively toward the open door and stepped into the dark caravan.

It was a mess, as though it had been used by squatters or wild animals or both. Whoever had lived here, Harry decided, was long gone. He closed the door and magically locked it, then found a far corner, two rooms away from the entrance (the interior was actually surprisingly spacious) and changed into a griffin again, settling down to sleep. He had a long, hard road ahead of him, he didn't even know where he was, he had no money, and soon the Ministry would be looking for him, and maybe Dumbledore's operatives, too. But for now, all he could think of was sleep, and soon he thought of nothing at all....

* * * * *

"What do y'mean he *won't*?"

"Well, it's not so much he *won't*, y'see, as he *can't*."

"Why not?"

"Oh, don't get me started...."

"What are you on about?"

"Well....he's inside again."

"What? He just got out!"

"Aye, well....he was driving back from Peterhead with some of the lads, and they was stopped and the car was searched....and they was all hauled in."

"Drugs *again*? Where is he? Surely I can say something to get him out, pay someone his bail...."

"No, it's no good. He's had too many offenses, and as you say, Donny was just out on conditional release. He's violated the conditions now, they say...."

"Bugger!"

"Now, now, I'm sure you can find another caddie...."

Harry heard a loud *bang!* as though someone had kicked something made of metal very hard.

"Here, now! There's no call for that!"

He changed into his human form and pulled himself up to peer out a dirty window in the direction from which the voices were coming; it was a man in outlandish golfing togs, wearing a tam with an enormous fluffy ball on top, and a weary-looking middle-aged woman who had been in the process of taking her washing off the line and putting it into a cracked plastic basket designed to look like wickerwork. She must be Donny's mother, Harry thought. She was standing outside one of the more derelict-looking caravans, and he could hear a radio blasting from somewhere inside it. The golfer had kicked her metal dustbins, denting one of them, and he continued to kick them some more, while the woman swatted at him with her hands and tried to get him to stop.

Harry had an idea; he quickly dropped his robes on the floor of the caravan, figuring he'd look less peculiar *without* a coat than *with* wizard's robes (even standard Azkaban issue). Then he concentrated very hard and made his hair grow very long, so that it could have been a year's growth or more. He reached behind and quickly braided it, then gave himself a bushy beard, as when he'd been at the British Museum. Finally, he left the caravan where he'd been sheltered and walked around to where the man and woman had been tusselling, just in time to see the man stalk off toward his car, a very new-looking BMW. The sun wasn't even up yet.

"Wait!" he called after him. The man turned, looking askance at him, but pausing, waiting to see why Harry had called to him.

"I--I understand you're looking for a caddie?" Harry said to him.

The golfer was around forty, greying at the temples, wearing a clashing combination of three different tartans, plus an argyle cardigan that shared colors with not one other garment he wore. He peered at Harry through suspicious blue eyes, his brown mustache quivering, his rage at losing his preferred caddie still not abated. He didn't answer Harry, and now the woman came up to them, staring at Harry and saying, "Where'd you come from, then? Who are ye?"

Harry thought furiously. "I'm--Dudley Dursley. I came to see my Uncle John, John MacLeod, but he doesn't seem to live here any more."

Now she was the one looking at him suspiciously. "That's because John MacLeod's been dead these thirteen years, he has. And yer not much older than that, I'll warrant."

"Well, I--I--" He thought some more. "Truthfully, I've left home. I live in Surrey, and--"

"Surrey! That's a good one!" the golfer responded. "Lad, you're as Scottish as I am! With that accent? Now, you sound like an inlander, mind ye, that's not Doric as we speak round here, but yer not from Surrey, or I'm the queen!" he proclaimed heartily, with a laugh. Harry stopped, frowning. He'd never really paid attention to his speech since September first. Do I sound like I'm from Scotland now? he thought. He remembered being aware of Uncle Duncan's and Mr. Lyon's speech. Of course, they were from Dunoon, much further south and on the west coast. Different accent. And his stepfather had carefully modulated speech that didn't betray any sort of accent at all, as though he didn't want people to know his origins.

"Well," Harry conceded, "I said I live there now. Or I did. We used to live in Scotland. I guess I was homesick. I don't feel like I belong in Surrey, and I finally saved up enough money from working in my dad's store, so I headed north. But I don't have any money now--I was robbed, and they took my coat, too--and I'm trying to get--" he wracked his brain some more. "--to Huntly!" he finally said, remembering Ron's testimony and the newspaper Crouch had shown him, *The Huntly Express*. "I have some other relatives near Huntly." Suddenly, he was no longer angry with Ron for having testified against him; he wouldn't have known where he was going otherwise.

"Aye, that's more like it. I knew y'sounded like an inlander. All right, tell y'what: I've got a big bet on with Harvey Urquhart to win today. I've never beat'im yet, and Donald was to be m'good luck charm. He's helped me win before, I've just never had'im when I've played Urquhart. You ever caddie before?"

"Oh, all the time," Harry lied, then remembered he'd said he worked in a store. The man eyed him appraisingly.

"Well--in a pinch, I suppose you'll do. There's twenty quid in it for ye, thirty if I win. More if I win big. Oh, by the way, I'm Andy MacRae." He held out his hand and Harry took it. "I run Scottish Detectors."

Harry recoiled. "What?"

"Scottish Detectors. We're over on Frithside Street. Metal detectors. We ship all over Scotland." Harry breathed a sigh of relief; at first, he'd thought the man had said *detectives*.

"Oh," Harry answered more calmly, but he tensed up again when he heard the report coming from the radio in the caravan:

"And residents along the northern and eastern coast should be on the lookout for Harry Potter, an escapee from a juvenile detention centre who is considered to be very dangerous. It is suspected that he made his escape on a fishing vessel, and all fishing ports in the area should be on alert for this convicted killer. That includes Banff, MacDuff, Newtown, Longmanhill, Craigmaud, Ladysford, Mid Ardlaw, Rosehearty, Fraserburgh, Peterhead and all points in between. Potter stands at six-feet one inches, weighs approximately thirteen stone--"

"We should go!" Harry said very loudly, trying to drown out the rest of the physical description. "Don't want to keep Urquhart waiting, do you?"

As they walked toward the BMW, Harry looked over his shoulder at Donny's disheveled mother, who was still looking at him suspiciously. *Had MacLeod said he didn't have relatives before he died?* he wondered. He hoped she wasn't listening to the radio report. How had an owl reached the Ministry already? Wait, he thought--it only needed to get to Banff, then there were faster ways to communicate, like fireplaces or just Apparating. The Ministry had done the same thing with him they'd done with Sirius: alerted the Muggle authorities so that it wouldn't be just wizards looking for him. Great, Harry thought. He was glad he'd decided to grow his hair and beard and leave his Azkaban robes in the caravan.

When they were in the car driving to the golf club, Harry noticed MacRae looking at him suspiciously again, and the older man finally said, "Why didn't you just call home to ask for money? After you was robbed?"

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, well, I had a row with my dad before I left. He didn't want me to go. I've been working for him since I finished school when I was sixteen. But that's been two years now, and I'm sick of it. I'm eighteen now," he lied again, "and I want to do what *I* want, finally. I don't want to be under his thumb any more."

MacRae nodded. "Good lad. Stand on your own two feet. That's what I did. I left home at fifteen, went to sea. Deep sea crawler. We caught everything that swims in the sea. I learned how to do a grown man's job, took care of m'self. Saved up my money and started my own business when I was twenty-four. Folks the world over will make fun of Scots' frugality, but I owe my life to my miserliness. If I hadn't been tight with a pound all those years, I wouldn't be where I am today." Harry nodded, glancing at the car's silent radio and hoping that MacRae would keep it turned off while they drove.

In very little time, they pulled into a car park outside a building with a sign proclaiming it to be the *Fraserburgh Golf Club*. So that's where I am, he thought. Fraserburgh. He'd resisted asking Donny's mother and MacRae, as that would have sounded a bit peculiar. When he opened the car door, a gust of wind sliced through him and he shivered. MacRae saw. "Here, now. Come with me." Wondering what he meant, Harry followed him round to the boot of the car, in which were some paper shopping bags with old clothes that smelled of mothballs. "For the charity bazaar at the church. I'm supposed to take them later. My wife's the chair. But you take this," he said, extracting a heavy brown tweed jacket from one of the bags. Harry put it on; it fit perfectly, was fabulously warm and in pristine condition.

"You're getting rid of this?" he asked, amazed. Then he could have bitten his tongue, looking at MacRae's paunch. If this had ever been his jacket, it had been years since he would have been able to wear it.

"No, no. That was my daughter's boyfriend's. *Lloyd*," he added distastefully. "She met him at uni. Nose so high in the air, if he went out in the rain without an umbrella he'd drown." He paused, and Harry laughed appreciatively, realizing that this was his cue.

"But--doesn't he want it back?" Harry said, confused.

"Who cares if he does? He left it at our house after she finally told him to sod off--and not before time. Should have been six months earlier than it was, but there you go. If'er dad had told her that, she'd probably be with him yet. A girlfriend told her he made a pass at her, and she finally saw the light. Good riddance, I say. You need a jacket, you take that one with my blessing. I think it's from some place in London..."

Harry glanced quickly inside the jacket, and upon seeing the word *Sloane* he looked back at MacRae and agreed.

"Well--thanks. I'm much warmer."

"O'course, with that hair and beard, y'look like one of her uni tutors now, the ones who read philosophy and think it's still 1971, and who keep talking about what it was like to live in a commune in California. Evidently, American women in these communes would shag any man with any kind of British accent within five minutes of meeting him. Go figure what'll make some women hot, eh? Thank goodness my Stella has more sense than that." Harry smiled feebly and shrugged. I'm glad I'm not trying to date MacRae's daughter, he thought.

They went into the clubhouse, and Harry was glad that one difference between the holding cells at the Ministry and Azkaban was that at Azkaban, they were able to shower daily. Under the ex-boyfriend's jacket he was wearing a reasonably clean shirt and trousers, too.

They entered the club and MacRae immediately accosted a tall, white-haired man who had to be twenty years his senior, with a large droopy mustache and a floppy tam of his own. His outfit, in stark contrast to MacRae's, was completely coordinated and mostly of solid colors. He wore the same tartan for his vest as for his tam. He looked immaculate, and Harry suddenly wondered whether his fingernails were clean.

"Aah, Harvey!" MacRae said as he approached the man, who looked more annoyed than anything else.

"MacRae," he said disdainfully, nodding. He looked even more disapprovingly at Harry. "Reduced to using one of those American surfers who never went home last summer?"

Harry turned to MacRae, bewildered. "People surf here?"

"We're famous for it. In season, of course. No, Harvey, this is Dudley Dursley. He's on his way to Huntly to visit family, but he agreed to give me a hand today, as my usual caddie is, er, indisposed."

Urquhart smirked knowingly. "Yes, MacRae; we all know how your caddie does tend to get himself *indisposed* quite a bit." Harry didn't think his speech could be called Scottish exactly; Urquhart probably went to a posh public school, he thought. Had the northern accent beaten out of him.

"Well, let's get down to it," Urquhart said clapping his hands and then rubbing them together. "We'll have a good breakfast, then out to the links." Harry glanced out the window; the sun was finally starting to rise. They liked to start golfing *early*.

He turned to MacRae, saying softly, "Actually sir--I haven't eaten recently--"

His new boss nodded and gestured toward a swinging door with a small round window in it. "Go in through there. That's the kitchen. Tell them your Mr. MacRae's caddie and you're to have anything you want to eat. It goes on my bill. All right?"

Harry nodded and watched the two golfing rivals head toward the comfortable dining room of the club. So far he'd certainly landed on his feet. He was to have a free breakfast and the opportunity to make at least twenty pounds, maybe more if MacRae did well. He found a foul-mouthed, jovial crew of young men and one young woman in white smocks manning the kitchen. They were glad to give him a huge breakfast with more eggs, toast, sausages and coffee than he could wish for. (He'd never tried coffee before, and found that once it had burned the taste buds off the end of his tongue, he liked it just fine, as he could no longer taste it). He felt like he had a full stomach for the first time since his last Hogwarts meal.

The kitchen staff had a small black-and-white television perched on a shelf above a prep table. There was some early news being broadcast. Just as he was getting ready to leave, he heard his name coming from the small box and jerked his head around in time to see a grainy photograph of himself being displayed on the tiny screen, while the precise, clipped voice gave the same description he'd heard on the radio earlier, and the fact that he'd killed his mother. While the list of coastal communities where he might be hiding was being recited again, he moved to slip out the door, glancing furtively at the staff. They didn't seem to be paying any particular attention to either the report or him, as they chopped vegetables and stirred pots and joked with each other. Then he heard another detail of the report, and froze.

"Potter has a distinctive tattoo on his left forearm: a skull with a tongue resembling a snake..." He swallowed and left quickly, hoping most people he ran into would disregard the report as the kitchen staff seemed to, and certainly hoping that no one would try to look at his left forearm. The issue hadn't come up before. Who had told? But a moment later, he knew: Dumbledore. Dumbledore would know about the Dark Mark.

Harry looked furtively around at the people who worked at the clubhouse; waiters carrying trays of food to the dining room, a man at the front desk was writing down a time for a foursome to play on the course later in the day....He suddenly felt enormously conspicuous, but the fact remained that people were busy with their lives; no one *expected* to actually meet up with a fugitive they'd heard about on the news. Hopefully no one would think to look for him on a *golf course*.

They were out on the first tee by six-thirty. Harry remembered MacRae saying he might give him more money if he won, so Harry discreetly made Urquhart's shots go awry. He thought it best not to mess with MacRae's game, since it would be more suspicious for MacRae to have a better day than usual, rather than Urquhart having a bad day. Urquhart's caddie was a tough-looking young man with short sandy hair and a thick neck, an inch or two shorter than Harry, but about four stone heavier, all of it muscle. He hefted Urquhart's clubs on his shoulder as though they were feathers, while Harry listed to one side from carrying MacRae's.

When they'd completed the first two holes, MacRae was already in good spirits; Urquhart had ten strokes more than him. He grinned at the older man, who was clearly not used to losing.

"All right, then, Harvey? On to Corbie Hill?"

Urquhart grunted. Harry assumed Corbie Hill was the name of the location of the third tee. But Harry was unprepared for the vista that awaited them on Corbie Hill; the entire town could be seen, including the harbor and over the North Sea to what looked like another fishing village. Yellow

gorse and other wildflowers were starting to decorate the landscape. The hill was buffeted by high winds, and Harry shivered.

"What's that?" he asked MacRae, pointing to the other village.

"Inverallochy. And inland--" he pointed, "the Buchan plain."

"Buchan?"

"Means cattle country. Thought you used to live in Scotland?"

Harry grinned. "I said I was from Surrey. You were the one insisting I had to be Scottish."

Urquhart turned around and glared at them; he hadn't yet teed off. "When you are *quite* finished..." he intoned, a not-so-veiled threat behind his voice. The other caddie also looked rather menacing, and Harry and MacRae left off conversing, although when the other two weren't looking at them, they glanced at each other, trying not to break out into laughter.

Then Harry whispered to MacRae, "Which direction is this hole?" MacRae pointed, and Harry nodded. Then he stepped back, so he was behind MacRae, and when Urquhart swung back his club, a split second before it would have made contact with the ball, Harry sent the ball flying in the opposite direction from the hole. Urquhart stared. On top of everything else, the ball had only traveled about twenty feet. The older man practically had steam coming out of his ears.

"I should get to do that one over!" he fumed at MacRae, who frowned.

"Whatever for?"

"Damn wind coming off the sea...."

"Now, now, Harvey," MacRae said to him cheerfully, his wind-reddened cheeks very round. "I'm contending with the same thing. Play'er as she lies," he said, getting ready to tee off. His ball went flying in a long arc in the general direction of the hole, and he turned to Urquhart, beaming beatifically.

Grumbling, Urquhart strode to his ball. When the same thing happened on the second stroke as the first, Harry had to try very hard not to burst out laughing at the expression on the man's face. I never knew golf could be so much fun, he thought. It felt so strange to have cheerful thoughts of any kind after spending the better part of a month with dementors. He only just realized that he hadn't actually *laughed* since the Longbottoms had taken him into custody. (Although, when he thought about it, it may have been longer than that; even before his mother had proposed taking Ron to the cave there had been precious little in his life that had inspired

laughter.) And yet he still had to postpone laughing. MacRae was clearly also bursting, and he and Harry exchanged conspiratorial glances. If only he knew how much of a conspiracy it really is, Harry thought.

To warm themselves from the inside out, both Urquhart and MacRae had thermal carafes of hot coffee, which Harry and the other caddie had to carry in addition to the bags, but they were also able to share it. Harry didn't care what he was drinking as long as it was hot. Then he almost spit out his first mouthful when he realized that MacRae had put whiskey in the coffee. Scotch actually, I'll bet, Harry thought. Now that he knew, he took another sip. His tongue was already thoroughly burnt by the coffee he'd had with his breakfast, so the taste didn't bother him (although he was vaguely aware of it), and he thought it was possible that the amount of whiskey in the coffee was an even smaller proportion than when Snape had given him the watered down whiskey in his office.

When was that? he thought as they walked to another hole. Then he remembered; it was after he returned to the castle from listening to the tape from Wormtail. *Snape*. It seemed like ages since he'd thought of him as *Snape*. Harry tried not to think about what a state he might be in right now. Mourning his wife, his son and his stepdaughter. Visiting his other son in St. Mungo's and hearing that his stepson was a fugitive. Getting ready to go on the run himself. Harry had thought Severus Snape seemed like a happier man in this timeline; he was married, had children, a home life. He'd never been exposed as either a Death Eater or a spy, so he wasn't at risk the way he was in Harry's other life. Harry had heard him *laugh*, and not at someone else's expense (he'd heard *that* before). And yet--it was a life built upon Harry's curse. The curse he'd put on his mother to control her....

He looked up suddenly, just in time to divert Urquhart's ball from its flight in mid-air. He'd almost forgotten that what he was trying to control now was the outcome of the golf game. Urquhart let fly some choice expletives when he saw his ball change direction. Probably thinks it's the wind again, Harry thought, trying not to grin. He forced himself to put his stepfather out of his mind for now. No good dwelling on all that now.

Hole after hole, Urquhart's ball went flying in the opposite direction; it went unerringly into traps and water hazards, or it refused for several tries to go into the hole, even when it seemed he should be able to tap it right in. Harry was more frustrated and less amused as time went on; MacRae was so bad, Harry had to really lengthen the game and add anywhere from three to six strokes to each hole for Urquhart.

By the seventeenth hole, Urquhart had nine more strokes than MacRae. He had been growing progressively more red in the face as he tried repeatedly to get his golf balls to do what he knew they should. Harry tried not to feel guilty about sabotaging Urquhart. After all, it was only golf.

When Urquhart tapped his final ball into the cup, the difference had increased to eleven strokes. MacRae tried to sink his final putt, but the ball swerved and kept going beyond the hole. Harry looked at the others, making sure they were ignoring him; as MacRae tried again, Harry subtly held out his hand and concentrated hard on the ball. This time, it looked like the ball was going to go past the cup again, but it suddenly made a right turn, a perfect ninety-degree angle, and fell into the cup.

MacRae was happier than anyone Harry had ever seen. Harry wished he had been able to be more subtle about helping him at the end, but he was afraid that if MacRae had to try too many times to sink the putt, he'd eat up the lead he had over Urquhart. The older man was looking grumpily at MacRae and his shining face.

"Let me see that ball. That didn't look right."

Harry was glad he'd been adding to Urquhart's strokes rather than helping MacRae; it was very hard to help someone as incompetent as Andy MacRae. Urquhart's caddie looked grumpy; Harry guessed that he was also promised a bonus if his boss won.

The ball was examined, found to be unremarkable, and Urquhart snuffed, handing it back to Harry. Harry put the ball away in MacRae's bag, and carefully put away his putter, covered neatly with an argyle sock. Then he saw that Urquhart had removed a large wad of bills from his pocket and was counting out quite a lot for MacRae. He handed the wad to Harry's boss with a frown.

"Had an off day," he mumbled, then turned and led his caddie back to the clubhouse. Harry shouldered MacRae's bag and followed his boss back; MacRae was practically skipping. Before they went inside, he stopped and handed five twenty-pound notes to Harry.

"There y'go, Dudley. Told ye I'd give y' more if I won. Are y'sure you need to go to Huntly? Y'could be m'new good luck charm."

"No, thank you anyway. I really need to get to Huntly."

Suddenly, MacRae's eyes lit up. "Dudley!" he exclaimed. "I know how you can get to Huntly and still have that hundred quid in yer pocket when you get there!"

Harry frowned. "How?"

"C'mon. We'll talk over lunch. You come sit with me in the dining room this time. This calls for a celebration!"

Harry decided he wasn't going to pass up a free lunch and a free trip to Huntly, so he followed MacRae into the dining room of the club, where the

waiters looked askance at his beard and hair, but otherwise waited upon him with as much decorum as they waited on anyone else.

As they ate, Harry learned that the Huntly football club was playing "The Broch" that afternoon, as the Fraserburgh team was called. The coach of the Huntly team was married to MacRae's sister. He said he'd arrange for Harry to ride back to the other town with the team. Harry looked forward to this; it would be much safer, he felt, than wandering the roads or riding a bus or a train where anyone could get on or off at each town. And people playing football all day would probably be too busy to listen to the radio and connect the story of Harry Potter, dangerous escaped killer, with Dudley Dursley, impromptu caddie.

MacRae drove them to Bellslea Park, where the game was already underway. Soon Harry had ascertained that "The Broch" wore the black and white striped shirts, black shorts and red socks, while Huntly wore all white with black trim. It was a fierce game, and he listened to MacRae discuss other league games with some mates standing nearby.

"Fort William drew two-two with the Cove Rangers, d'ye believe it? They should hang their heads in shame. Not beatin' Fort William...."

"Did you hear about Ayr United? Banff walked all over'em..."

"I have a bet on with Fergus, Clachnacuddin over Deverondale, twenty quid."

"Are ye mad? Are ye just *throwin'* yer money away now?"

"Shit, man. *Clachnacuddin*? Just give'im his money now, why don't ye. And as long as yer givin' it away, how about the ten quid ye owe me..."

Harry wandered about the pitch, hands deep in his pockets, watching the game idly. He had no reason to want to affect the outcome. Football was not the same as golf; these were professional games leading to a championship. He wouldn't feel right tampering with this. There was no extenuating reason to do it anyway, but he didn't think he'd do it even if there were.

There were seats for fewer than five-hundred people, he reckoned. Although the temperature was barely above freezing, this bright March day there was a good turnout, even supporters for the visiting team. Harry looked at the shining faces of the spectators, enjoying a fine spring day out, each cheering on their favorite football club, people whose lives did not include dementors or spies or dark wizards or initiation as Death Eaters. It was a fishing village. The people led simple lives, enlivened by a football game or going out to meet whichever fishing vessel had returned most recently, welcoming home sons and fathers and husbands. Harry was suddenly aware of an envy such as he had never felt well up in him.

Oh, to be *normal*. To be unextraordinary. To be an oblivious Muggle, never suspecting the existence of the wizarding world, nor the horrors it contained. He had often longed to be an ordinary wizard in his old life, like Ron, rather than the famous Harry Potter. And in this life, he had had that for a while. But now--now he was *infamous*. He gazed round at the people watching the match. In all likelihood, he thought, very little has changed for them since I changed the timelines. The lives they're leading are probably virtually identical.

He had no way of proving this, of course, and knowing that there were numerous changes in the Muggle world, such as the wars in which Voldemort's heir had meddled, it was possible that this was not true. I've got to fix it somehow, he thought. Hopefully Draco will come to the cave....

Suddenly, he saw a familiar face on the other side of the pitch.

It was Roger Davies.

His heart leapt into his throat. *What was Davies doing here?* He remembered finding out that Cedric Diggory and Niamh Quirke where the young operatives who were at the initiation. He'd realized that that meant that poor Katie's child had a Death Eater for a father. Davies was wearing a long dark coat, his hands deep in his pockets, his eyes scanning the crowd. Harry tried not to panic. He stood behind a man who was shouting and waving a sign that read, "THE BROCH" in large sloppy letters. Now and then he glanced quickly around the wildly gesticulating Fraserburgh supporter. Davies hadn't seen him. Great, Harry thought. I have to worry about the Ministry, Dumbledore's operatives *and* Death Eaters. And of the three, the group that worried him the most was the Death Eaters, so naturally, the first person he saw pursuing him was Roger Davies....

Harry hadn't really been paying attention to the play. Suddenly, there was a crowd on the field, and everyone seemed to be screaming at everyone else. In the ensuing confusion, a player from the Broch was given a yellow card, one from Huntly was given a red card, and when the dust had settled and Harry looked again, Davies was gone.

He carefully walked back around the pitch when the match was over and made his way to MacRae's BMW in the car park, glancing furtively around him the whole time, prepared to respond in a split second should Davies leap out at him between the parked cars. But the only person who accosted him was MacRae, striding over to him with his brother-in-law by his side. The Broch had won, three-to-two. Thus MacRae was in far better spirits than his sister's husband, whose name was Dirk Menzies. Harry shook hands with him and confirmed that he needed a lift to Huntly, and before he knew it, he was bidding MacRae and Fraserburgh goodbye and boarding the team bus, relieved that he'd evaded the only other wizard in Fraserburgh.

A hulking forward immediately settled in the seat on the other side of the aisle from him, sweating profusely and draining a large clear plastic bottle of water in what seemed to be one gulp. He didn't introduce himself before asking abruptly, "Why Huntly?"

"I'm, um going to see some relatives," Harry stuttered.

He nodded, then suddenly turned to the driver, right in front of him, and as abruptly as he'd spoken to Harry, he said to the driver, "When we get to Banff, I want to stop at a sweet shop 'n' get me mum a birthday present. I forgot before."

The driver grumbled. "Stops for pissing and spewing only," he said mechanically. "Possibly also for bleedin'. Depends on how much. 'Sides, the shops'll be closed by the time we're in Banff."

The forward swore colorfully, then became wheedling. "Aw, Gordon, come on..."

Harry's heart was going a mile a minute in his chest. "Banff? Did you say Banff? I can't go to Banff...." he said without thinking, then realized this would sound very strange. The Auror with the Welsh accent had said that something like half the population of Banff was wizarding. Harry found it hard to believe that the Muggle half didn't suspect anything. *Banff will be crawling with Aurors*, he thought. "Couldn't we go another way?" Harry asked the driver now, although he knew already what the answer would probably be; the driver didn't seem like the most accommodating sort.

Then another player in the seat behind him sprung up. "Aye, Gordon! Let's take the A981 through Strichen. That passes about a mile from Carmichael. It'd be easy to get back on the A981 after stopping there."

The driver surveyed the second player with a jaundiced eye. "And what's in Carmichael, might I ask?" he drawled.

"My mum. Haven't seen'er in ages. Come on, Gordon...."

"We go the way we've always gone," he said loudly and firmly. He was making a proclamation. "We take the A98 to Banff, then the A97 through Aberchirder to Huntly. Anyone who has a problem with that can walk back, hear?"

They murmured assent, and Harry sank down into his seat. He would have to be very careful when they were passing through Banff. What if the Muggle police were blocking the roads and checking all vehicles? And by going back to the cave, he was literally returning to the scene of the crime. What if he went all that way only to discover Aurors waiting for him there?

He tried to put these thoughts out of his head as the trip began; the sun was going down now, and Harry stared at the western sky through the bus' front window. Twenty-four hours ago he was taking off from Azkaban. He'd been free for exactly one day, and he'd already seen a Death Eater who was obviously after him. Suddenly he was glad he'd escaped for a different reason; he would have been very vulnerable had he stayed in Azkaban. A Death Eater could have come for him at any time, and no doubt the dementors wouldn't have stopped the assassination of the disobedient servant of Lord Voldemort. And even if he hadn't been killed on the spot, they probably could have taken him easily enough to Voldemort, who would have been glad to do it himself....

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Now here he was, on a bus heading straight for a town that was half wizard. Really smart, Potter, he thought. But it would mean getting back to Hogwarts by the morning, and for free, so he tried to put these worries out of his head.

The bus roared onto the road to Banff.

* * * * *

Saying that the bus was heading "straight" for Banff was something of a misnomer; the road swerved about ten miles south of the coast before swinging north again, where it went through MacDuff before reaching the larger town of Banff. In the dim streetlights, Harry could see that the pavements were deserted, although it was early. The forward would have to get his mother a late birthday present.

They stopped at a pub to eat (Harry noticed that most of the players "ate" pints of ale for their dinner). Harry didn't want to spend too much of his money and settled on some chips and a Coke. After everyone had used the loo and they were boarding the bus again, two figures in long dark coats stopped them. It was a man and a woman; a very *familiar* man and woman.

The Longbottoms.

Damn! Harry thought. Those two are always showing up just when they're least welcome. Then he tried to imagine a time when he *would* welcome them, and realized how ridiculous that was. He had bought another serving of chips to take with him, and when he saw the Aurors, he clutched the greasy paper cone which held them, fear paralyzing him. He peered furtively around the large forward while Gemma Longbottom spoke to Dirk Menzies.

"Who are you lot?" she said, nodding at the team. Menzies looked back at her truculently.

"Huntly football club. Who's askin'?"

She pulled out a very official-looking card. "D.I. Longbottom."

Then her husband pulled out his card. "And D.C.I. Longbottom. We have just a few questions for you."

Hmm. She was pretending to be a Detective Inspector, and he was pretending to be a Detective *Chief* Inspector. *That was rather a high rank*, Harry knew; then he thought, *Not very bright*. It wouldn't be hard to check with the local constabulary to find out who all of the D.C.I.s were. But, as offended as Menzies looked at being stopped, he also didn't seem to be the sort to check later on whether he'd been accosted by real police, rather than impostors. The cards had been handed over very casually, and Menzies hadn't given them a second glance. They looked like they'd done this hundreds of times, as though they were rather bored with it, really.

"We're looking for a young man who was being held in a juvenile detention centre," Neville's mother said, handing him a photograph. Harry held his breath, but Menzies just shrugged and handed it back to her. "Despite top security," she continued, "he managed to escape. He's very dangerous--killed his own mother, who used to work with us here."

Now Menzies opened his eyes wide and stared at them. "His mum was a copper and he *killed* her?"

Gemma Longbottom nodded. "The name's Harry Potter. Six foot one, thirteen stone, short black hair, clean shaven, glasses."

Harry quickly took off his glasses and put them in his jacket pocket. "Potter, eh? Well, all we have here is our football club. Oh, except for this one bloke--but he's just me brother-in-law's caddie. From Surrey. Gettin' a lift to visit relatives in Huntly. But he's got this long braid down 'is back, and a big bushy beard...." He pantomimed the size of the beard.

Frank Longbottom shook his head. "No, that's not him. Sorry to bother you," he said, turning with his wife and walking toward some people coming out of another pub across the street.

Harry hurried onto the bus with the others, trying not to show how nervous he was, willing the Longbottoms to stay where they were, questioning some young women across the street. The bus roared away again, and Harry put his glasses back on, so he could see the Longbottoms as they grew smaller and smaller.

Well, he thought. So far that's a Death Eater and two Aurors. *I definitely made the right choice to ride with the football club*. They had switched to the A97, heading south-by-southwest into the darkness. Harry sighed, leaning back and closing his eyes. Will I be able to do this? he wondered.

He listed in his mind the things he had to do.

One: Reach the cave in the foothills.
Two: Convince Draco to come with me and to write in the diary, guided by me, so we can feed Riddle misinformation.
Three: Go to Dover. Retrieve Voldemort's wand.
Four: Go to Godric's Hollow in Wales.
Five: Continue to have Draco write in the diary until Tom Riddle is strong enough to emerge from its pages.
Six: Convince Riddle to perform the *Tempus Bonae Voluntatis* spell.
Seven: Convince the me from September first *not* to change the timeline.

Oh, and do something to prevent Voldemort from changing it too. He'd almost forgotten about that. Voldemort had of course stood by before and watched Harry put *Imperius* on his mother because Harry was doing just what Voldemort wanted him to do. Now...now he would have to do something to keep *him* from interfering, too. And yet--he would also have to keep Voldemort from being seen, so that a mere glimpse of him by a person in that time wouldn't alter past events from the way they'd first played out, when both of Harry's parents were killed.

The list depressed him. It was too daunting. How would he pull it off? He had just under one hundred pounds and he had to practically take a tour of the island of Great Britain. Sure, sometimes he could fly. He could even carry Draco as a griffin and he probably wouldn't be slowed down too much. But it would help a great deal to know people in the Muggle world who might help him....

And then it came to him: the Muggle-borns! He knew where Ruth was, and Hermione, and Alicia, and Maggie....He never had found Dean's house in London, but Hermione and Maggie were in London, so he certainly wouldn't need three people there. He knew that Justin was at Eton, but security would no doubt be very tight because of the princes. Plus, he had the feeling that Justin was hacked off at him for the Liam thing.

Right. They needed to get to Ruth, then Alicia, then--

Oh shit. The Muggle-borns would have heard the reports about his escape as well. They would all think he was a killer. He swallowed. *Hermione thinks I'm a murderer.* Well, he thought, somehow he had to convince them that the trial was a farce. I'll be traveling with Draco, he thought, and the others had met him; perhaps he can explain to them my situation before they see me and panic....

Which made it even more imperative that Draco agree to go with him. He tried to imagine Draco traveling as a Muggle, hiding and sneaking around....*He'll be grousing in no time.* Harry sighed and leaned back as the bus hurtled into the night, wishing it were Ron who was going to be his traveling companion. The Ron from his old life. Even though they'd

landed in hot water, it had been great fun flying the Ford Anglia to school at the beginning of their second year. He missed Ron so much....He tried not to blame the Ron in this life for what he'd said at the trial. He also tried not to think about how Ron was probably feeling right now, with Ginny *really* dead....Then he found himself thinking of it too, he couldn't help it. He remembered, as best he could, every moment they'd ever spent together, even when he was still stalking her and she'd repeatedly snubbed him. He remembered her putting her arms around him when she was apologizing for the bet, and taking off her smock in the dark infirmary....

"Aberchirder! Petrol and loo stop!" the driver cried. The players groaned and stood, stretching and flexing their aching muscles. The driver was already on the ground, talking with a man in a greasy jumpsuit about the right sort of petrol for the bus. Harry joined the line of tired footballers waiting for the loo, shivering in the dark, trying not to be paranoid about the hulking shapes of the pumps. A man could hide behind one of those easily, he found himself thinking. He felt very jumpy.

No one seemed to be following him in Aberchirder, but then, they didn't stay long. Harry remembered the long list of coastal communities that were supposed to be on the lookout for Harry Potter. Perhaps they're not looking inland yet, he thought. He wondered briefly whether he and Draco should head back to the coast and try to get jobs on a fishing vessel, but he decided that if anyone in pursuit did discover them there, they'd be trapped. Unless he changed into a griffin and flew, and if he did that they'd know he was an Animagus. Plus, he didn't think he would be able to fly fast enough to outstrip wizards who could Apparate.

He let himself doze off as the bus pulled out of Aberchirder, and it felt like only seconds later someone was shaking his shoulder and saying, "Huntly." His eyes flew open and he looked around. The bus was parked at the edge of a large square surrounded by stoic grey stone buildings. Harry shook his head to clear it. "This is where yer going, ain't it?"

Harry nodded sleepily and stood, a yawn suddenly overtaking him. When he was standing on the pavement, the other men started moving toward their cars, preparing to drive home, although some simply began to move off on foot. Menzies stayed until everyone was off the bus, then paid the driver. When the bus roared off, the coach noticed that Harry was still standing aimlessly nearby, and he frowned.

"Know where yer goin'?"

Harry hugged himself to keep warm; he strongly suspected it was below freezing now. "Well, my relatives don't live in Huntly, precisely. This is the nearest town. I need directions to the village of Rhynie, near the Clash. That's the closest village to here that's also near the forest, right?" He remembered Ron's false testimony again.

"Well, not really. Gartly's closer to the forest...."

"Gartly!" Harry said suddenly. "Of course, what was I thinking? They live in Gartly." He hoped Menzies didn't think this was odd. "But the thing is--I don't know how to get to Gartly."

Harry listened attentively while Menzies talked about taking this road and that, until he stopped, realizing that Harry didn't have a car.

"Oh, bloody hell. Get in me car. I'll drive ye."

Harry climbed in the car gratefully. He felt ill suddenly, as though he shouldn't have eaten the greasy chips. *They probably hadn't changed the oil in the fryer in five years*, he thought, as he broke out in a sweat. Then he realized that the center of the pain wasn't his stomach; it was his left arm. His forearm had started a low-level throbbing, and his breathing grew ragged as he realized what that meant. *VolDEMORT was going to call on all of the Death Eaters.*

He hadn't been found yet, so more people were needed. Harry remembered how they'd run Karkaroff to ground, then put him on the rock....

As Menzies drove, Harry felt himself shaking more and more. The pain was growing more intense. Finally, a pain that was both sharp and burning attacked his arm, and he cried out, holding his forearm cradled against him, sweat dripping off his nose.

Menzies was startled and swerved to the right momentarily. Harry looked up in alarm, seeing headlights coming right at them, and right behind the headlights, a large white lorry. Menzies hurriedly swung the wheel over and had them back on the left side of the road before the lorry passed them, a strong breeze whistling past the car windows as it sped by, and the driver leaned on his horn in anger. *He probably thought he was going to kill us*, Harry thought. He was still breathing raggedly, from the pain in his arm and now the near-collision. Menzies scowled at him.

"What's the matter with you?" he cried, a mix of anger and concern lacing his voice.

"I'm--I'm all right now. I'm sorry. It--it caught me by surprise. I--I got a seizure. In my arm."

"A seizure? You mean like epilepsy? Is that why ye don't drive?"

"Um, not exactly. Well, sort of. All right. It's probably the best way to think of it."

"I thought people with seizures got all white at the mouth and rollin' on the ground."

"There's all kinds of seizures." Harry had actually heard his Aunt Petunia talking about this once. She was mocking a neighbor who had said her daughter didn't have epilepsy; that term wasn't used any more. She had a "seizure disorder." Aunt Petunia wasn't kind about it; she as much as implied that the woman's daughter shouldn't come near Dudley so he wouldn't catch it.

"They don't say epilepsy any more," he said, remembering. "They say 'seizure disorder.'"

Menzies grunted and kept his eyes steadfastly on the road; he evidently didn't care what it was called as long as it didn't make him drive his car into the front grille of a lorry. Harry resisted the urge to push up his sleeve and look at the Dark Mark; he didn't want Menzies to see it. Harry wondered where Voldemort was gathering them. At Dover again, perhaps? Or maybe somewhere in Scotland, since that was where people were searching for him. Perhaps some place nearby....

He was panicking again; he tried to breath calmly, cradling his arm and watching the small patch of road illuminated by Menzies' headlights. It was mildly disorienting to Harry, only seeing about ten yards ahead. At length, they came to a small house; it took Harry a moment to see that it had a sign outside it that said *The Clash*. Appropriate name for a pub here, he thought. There was a small car park, and Menzies pulled in.

Harry's breathing was regular now, but he couldn't believe what he'd gone through in the past day. Flying to Fraserburgh from Azkaban, setting off an alarm in a museum, working as a caddie and cheating for his boss, dodging around and hoping no one connected him with the descriptions of Harry Potter on the news, seeing Roger Davies at the football match and the Longbottoms outside the pub in Banff. Now, the Dark Mark assaulting him with pain as deep as what he'd felt when it was first burned into him. He felt weary down to his very bones, and yet he still couldn't rest. Not until he reached the cave....

He turned to Menzies. "I don't know how to thank you," he said, meaning every word. "I'll be fine now, I'm sure. The sign says they do rooms, so I'll just stay here tonight and go looking for my relatives in the morning. You've been very helpful." He shook his hand and Menzies nodded. Harry noted that when he was standing on the car park's gravel, Menzies didn't drive off. He seemed to be waiting for Harry to do something. Pretending he didn't care, Harry strode toward the pub, hands deep in the pockets of the tweed jacket. Oh well, he thought. I can get something in the pub and then nip out and find the forest...Too bad they probably don't have butterbeer here....

But the moment he walked into the pub, he saw that he was in trouble again.

Looking like Davy White, but wearing old, worn-looking Muggle clothes, Albus Dumbledore sat at the end of the bar, listening to a young man speaking earnestly to him about an investment program. A large brown mastiff lounged on the floor under their feet, his head on his paws, a sleepy expression in its eyes. Harry turned on his heel, hoping Dumbledore hadn't seen him, and bolted out again. Harry dreaded explaining this to Menzies, but he could see his car moving along the road back to Huntly again, and Harry heaved a sigh of relief. He walked around behind the pub, finding that it backed up very close to the forest, and Harry entered it; waiting until he was at least ten yards inside the trees, he transformed into the griffin, and continued to walk through the forest, now with the rolling gait of a lion. When he found himself in a clearing, he finally spread his wings and took off, spiraling upward, until he was over the trees, flying toward--

Hogwarts castle.

He could see it in the distance, just like when he'd gone through the forest the other time and come out the other side, to the Muggle village (probably Gartly, he realized now). It looked wonderful and welcoming. It looked like home. He didn't know whether griffins ever wept, but he felt like weeping as he flew toward the glowing towers and turrets and parapets....

But as he drew nearer and near, he almost stopped and transformed in the air, he was so shocked. He fell for a second before he remembered to keep moving his wings. He remembered that he wasn't actually supposed to be flying back to the castle, and he swerved to aim for the foothills. When he landed outside the cave, he transformed back into this human form and gazed down in horror at Hogwarts.

Dementors. Dementors were everywhere. In the flaring torches on the stone walls he could see that they surrounded the castle. They lined the edge of the forest. He could see their outlines behind the parapets, eerily backlit by more torches. That meant they were even *in* the castle, something Dumbledore had never allowed when he was headmaster. He'd said that he thought McGonagall was an able administrator, but had he agreed with her on *this*? Did he hate Harry *that* much? Even when he still thought Sirius was the one who'd betrayed Harry's parents and killed a street full of Muggles, he hadn't gone that far.

Harry ducked into the cave and groped his way to the end of its long arm, finding with his hands the small cairn of rocks under which he'd buried his wand. He scrawled frantically to move them, and when his fingers curled around the familiar, worn wood of his *own wand* he thought he would cry.

There; that's better. Let dementors come, he thought. I can conjure a Patronus now....

He leaned against the cave wall in the dark, not daring to light his wand lest the glow show even a little at the mouth of the cave, and someone in the distance saw it. Now he just needed for Draco to come. Maybe tomorrow, he thought. There were no classes. It would be Sunday. Please Draco, please do what I asked....

But then he remembered the dementors. He remembered that when he'd wanted to go into Hogsmeade, he'd had to use the tunnel that went to Honeyduke's, because dementors can sense someone even when they were under an Invisibility Cloak. Harry hoped Draco knew that, and that he'd use the map to find the best tunnel to take into Hogsmeade, then turn back to the foothills to reach the cave. The foothills weren't on the grounds of Hogwarts, so the dementors wouldn't block his way if he were coming from the village.

Harry put his wand into his pocket and changed into a griffin again, curling up to sleep, remembering his close calls with Davies, the Longbottoms and Dumbledore, and then thinking the same thing over and over....

Please, Draco. Please, Draco. Please....

* * * * *

In the stark light of morning, Harry sat up and changed into his human form. He could think more clearly this way. Draco might come any time, and he wanted to look like himself, even if he was hairier than usual. The beard was uncomfortable and he longed to get rid of it, but he didn't dare. When his stomach made complaining noises, he wished he'd bought something to eat at the pub where Menzies had left him, taking the chance that Dumbledore wouldn't recognize him. Then he thought about the fact that it was *Dumbledore*, and realized he'd done the right thing to make a quick exit. Just because it had taken *him* so long to realize that Dick was really Aberforth and Davy was really Dumbledore didn't mean the former headmaster was so thick he wouldn't recognize Harry with long hair and a beard.

Hour stretched into lonely hour. Harry fought the temptation to step outside the cave to see what the dementors were up to. He didn't dare, without the cover of the dark.

At last, he thought he heard something. Footsteps, then after the sound of someone slipping and falling, swearing. He smiled. That was Draco's voice. He heard scuffling, which he assumed was Draco crawling into the cave still wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Then he heard a gasp. Harry lit his wand so he could see, and Draco took off the Invisibility Cloak.

"You did it! You really did it!" Harry nodded, so grateful he had such a good friend. "Your dad--well, he was afraid--"

"What?"

Draco looked apprehensive, but he dove in anyway. "He was afraid they were just covering up for the Death Eaters. Claiming that you'd escaped, so no one would know--"

"That they'd killed me. Yeah, I thought of that myself, after I'd been out for almost a day. When I saw Roger Davies."

"*Davies?* How did you do it? Where did you go?"

Harry gave him a brief version of his adventures since escaping. Draco laughed over the golf, wishing he'd seen Urquhart's face when his shots all went wild. He didn't laugh, however, when he heard about the Longbottoms, nor when he heard about Dumbledore being in the Muggle pub on the other side of the forest.

"Damn! I can't believe you went through all that and still got here. *And* you have some Muggle money."

"Well, almost a hundred pounds may sound like a lot, but it's got to get us all the way to London, and then Dover, and then Wales."

"Us?"

Harry stared at him. "Why--why did you think I asked you to do this?"

Draco took the diary out of his robes. "I thought you wanted this. Don't know why, though. Didn't you tell me *no one* should write in that?"

"I know I did. But that's just because--because it *can* be dangerous. If someone's not watching you and guiding you..."

Draco frowned. "I don't get it. What're you going to do with it?" Harry looked at him. Suddenly, he couldn't do it. He couldn't ask his best friend to sacrifice himself this way. There had to be some other way, some other person....Draco continued to look at him. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"A basilisk," he said weakly. Draco tensed up.

"What did you say?"

"A basilisk. There's a basilisk in the castle. Remember that I told you--"

"Oh," he breathed with relief. "Right. I remember now."

"Yes. Writing in the diary--when you do that, Tom Riddle becomes stronger."

"Tom Riddle? Is that who *T.M. Riddle* is, then? And what happens when he becomes stronger?"

"Eventually--he can leave the diary. Take on solid form again. Do things."

"Do things?"

"Yes. But before that, he can also control the person writing in the diary. Make them do things like kill all the roosters, open the Chamber of Secrets, let the basilisk loose...."

Draco opened his eyes wide in understanding now. "You mean you get sort of hypnotized by writing in it, and controlled long-distance by this Riddle person--"

"Not long distance. The real Riddle has no idea it's going on. Riddle is a memory, magically living in the pages of the diary. When you write something on a page, the page absorbs it and Riddle writes back an answer which appears for a little while before disappearing. That's why all the pages look blank."

Draco still looked dissatisfied. "Okay, so I understand how the diary works now, but what I don't understand is who this Riddle is, and why you want to make him strong enough to come out of the diary. And what happens to you if you're giving all your strength to him?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Tom Riddle is Voldemort. When he was sixteen. That was his name. He was a prefect in Slytherin. Became Head Boy. While he was in school he opened the Chamber of Secrets and let the basilisk loose, and someone else was expelled for it. But through the diary, it could all happen again. And what happens to the person who writes in the diary is--well, they become a shell. Eventually, they might die, I don't know. If the diary is destroyed, they're all right again, they get their strength back."

"And you wanted to do this *why*?"

Harry choked, "Not me. You. I was going to ask you to do it. So I could do a spell with Riddle. That's why I hid Voldemort's wand. That's why we have to go to Dover, to get it back so Riddle can use his proper wand. Only--only I can't now. I can't ask you to do this. It isn't right...." He looked helplessly at his friend. Draco sat down on the floor of the cave with a thump, his mouth open.

"But--but--you still haven't said *why*? What's this spell you want to do with Voldemort? I mean, Riddle?" Draco looked amazed that Harry wanted to do anything with anyone remotely related to Voldemort.

Harry looked at his best friend. "Draco. You have to believe me when I tell you that I'm not crazy. Do you believe me?"

Draco looked puzzled. "Well--I guess."

Harry took a deep breath, and told him about his parents both being killed on Halloween night in 1981. He told him about Voldemort losing his powers and disappearing when he'd tried to kill Harry, about going to live with the Dursleys. He told him about Hagrid bringing him his Hogwarts letter and going to Diagon Alley; he told him about the Triwizard Tournament and what happened when he and Cedric touched the cup that was actually a Portkey. He told Draco that he'd put his own father in Azkaban and that he and Harry were becoming friends, although they hadn't liked each other much before. He told him about the summer at Mrs. Figg's, gardening and running and finding out that they'd played together when they were small.

Then he told him about September first. "I shouldn't have done it. I know that now. But--but I just couldn't bear to watch her die. And knowing that if she lived, I'd also have a sister--"

"*Jamie*," Draco breathed softly. Harry nodded.

"In the other time, Jamie was never born. But--but you *do* have a girlfriend. And--" he stammered now, "you love each other very much." His voice was very soft, thinking of Ginny, remembering the last time he'd held her, kissing her goodbye in the caretaker's office....Draco sat still, staring at the cave wall. "Draco?" Harry said tentatively. Draco's head whipped around abruptly.

"Yes," he said, sounding distracted. He seemed to be thinking, considering something. "So," he said finally, "you want to perform the same spell with Riddle that you performed with Voldemort, to get back to that night--"

"And prevent my other self from cursing my mother and saving her."

"But--but you--you already killed your mum," he whispered. "I mean--it was an accident, yeah, but still--"

Harry swallowed. "I know," he said, barely able to get the words out. "Don't you think--don't you think I've thought of that? But--but this world was never meant to be. It needs to be changed back. I told Dumbledore--"

"Dumbledore knows?"

Harry nodded. "I'm sure that's why he had Ron lie at the trial. He told me I shouldn't mess with time any more. And I know that's a good policy to have in general, and I wish I'd refused Voldemort, but I didn't, and now everything's just gone to hell..." He trailed off, trying not to break down, feeling utterly helpless and hopeless. Then he noticed that Draco had a faraway look in his eyes.

"That's how you did everything," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"From your other life. You said you won the Triwizard Tournament when you were a fourth-year. You learned to be an Animagus. You knew all those Muggle-borns in your other life, didn't you? The spells, the people--all this time, whenever Jamie and Ginny and I were saying, 'How do you know?' and you said, 'I can't tell you,' it was because of the other time, wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

Harry nodded. Draco was quiet again. "So," he finally said. "If I write in the diary, with you telling me what to write and keeping an eye on me so I don't do things like killing roosters and setting a basilisk loose, I can give Riddle enough strength to come out of the diary and do this spell with you, right?"

"Well--but I said I'd changed my mind. I'll--I'll find another way to do it. Something that doesn't require you to sacrifice yourself--"

"No." Draco's voice was suddenly very firm.

"What?"

"I said 'No.' I'll do it. I'll write in the diary. Don't feel guilty over me, Harry..."

"But--but I don't want to put you through that. You're my best friend..."

"Harry!" Draco cried, looking angry now. "Listen to me. I'm no friend. I did something horrible, something unforgivable. And because I did it, all of this mess has happened. It's all my fault, all of it. And I thought losing Jamie was my punishment--" his voice caught, and Harry saw a tear roll down his cheek. "I--I haven't been able to sleep since it happened. I would have thrown myself off the West Tower last night, but I would have had to get past dementors to do it, and they looked really eager to *kiss* someone. I wanted to be dead, not *soulless*...."

"What are you talking about? It was Ron Weasley who came out of hiding and--"

"No, it was before that. I did something--Weasley wouldn't have done what he did if it weren't for me--"

Harry frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Draco shook his head. "I can't tell you. I'm too ashamed. Just let me do this, Harry. To pay you back. Let me make up for what I did."

Harry was speechless. He hadn't expected this. What could Draco have done? But he didn't ask; he knew Draco wasn't ready to tell him. "You--you wanted to kill yourself?"

Draco nodded, looking down at his hands. "Jamie was--she was--without her--" He couldn't speak, and then he finally broke down, and Harry thought of Ginny again, and suddenly, the two friends, were clinging to each other and crying over the girls they loved, mourning them without shame, until they were purged and achieved a kind of catharsis. At length, they each sat back, wiping their eyes on their sleeves. Harry stared at Draco, who suddenly seemed much older, and possessing a firm resolve. He wanted to die rather than live without Jamie, and by giving his strength to Riddle, he could help Harry fix the timelines, and live a life where he'd never known Jamie or the heartbreak of losing her. Harry couldn't speak.

Suddenly, the hair stood up on the back of his neck, and he instinctively stood and took his wand out of his pocket, looking toward the cave entrance. Draco turned and stood also, taking out his own wand. Harry heard a high whining sound, growing nearer and nearer, then the unmistakable noise of a hound baying.

The mastiff he'd seen in *The Clash* entered the cave, his nose to the ground. Harry braced himself; he'd been found. The dog was Dumbledore's; he must have been using it to track Harry. The large canine sat down comfortably, looking at the two of them, tense and with their wands out, with an expression of extreme unconcern on its fleshy face. They waited. And waited. Where was Dumbledore? Harry wondered. What's going on?

Then Harry laughed, breaking the tension. "I've been running since sundown on Friday. All right, I was technically flying at that time. But I've gotten very jumpy. I can't believe a dog is making me act like this..."

Draco sighed with relief and walked tentatively over to the dog, holding out his hand for it to sniff. After the dog had approved him, he let Draco rub him behind the ears and pat his flank. "He's nice. Reminds me of some of the dogs Dad keeps. Hunting hounds."

Harry nodded. "I just panicked because a dog that looked just like that was in that pub last night with Dumbledore."

Draco looked up at Harry. "So. You said we have to get to London. Let's think about that first. How do we do it?"

Harry grimaced. "Well, I want to see how much it will cost for the two of us to get the train from Huntly. Maybe we can get as far as Edinburgh. We want to go as far and as fast as possible. Getting out of Scotland as soon as we can needs to be our top priority. We'll make stops along the way, of course. Ruth Pelta lives in Manchester, and if we can convince her not to panic and call the Muggle police, she might help us. And Alicia Spinnett is in Sywell, near Northampton. And we can go to Hermione in London. You can stay with her while I go to Dover and back on my own. After that, we'll go to Wales. While I'm going to Dover, you and Hermione can go to the Library and research the exact location of Godric's Hollow. I think it's probably pretty close to Cardiff, because of things my mum has said, but I want to really know where I'm going."

"Makes sense," he nodded.

"And we'll need some camping equipment. For Godric's Hollow."

"Camping equipment?"

"We'll need to settle in for a while, until Riddle gets strong enough. I don't know how long it'll take."

"Oh." Draco looked like he hadn't counted on camping in April. When the morning dawned, it would be the last day of March, and then April started on Tuesday. *Ginny's birthday*. If she were alive, it would have been her sixteenth birthday....

No, he thought. She is alive. In the other time. She has to be. She just has to be...

But this thought was abruptly drowned out by his shock. He stared at the space next to the dog. The air was shimmering strangely, and when it stopped, Albus Dumbledore was standing there, looking like Davy White. Unlike the previous evening, when he'd seen him in the pub, he was wearing wizard's robes. Harry's jaw hung open. He remembered Dumbledore saying once that he didn't need a cloak to be invisible. *No!* he thought again, for a different reason. *It can't be!*

"Hello, Harry," he said placidly, smiling. Harry felt like he couldn't breathe.

"No!" he cried aloud now, unable to do anything but stare at the old wizard. Draco however, was not as paralyzed.

"You old *bastard!*" he cried, his tears for Jamie dry now, as he whipped out his wand and pointed it at Dumbledore. "You framed Harry!"

"I protected a number of people by doing so," he said, still very calm, ignoring Draco's wand. "But I also protected Harry. I was aware of several Death Eaters who were under orders to kill him if he was acquitted. Even now, they are looking for him as diligently as the Aurors from the Ministry of Magic."

"And you," Harry said finally, angry. "You *were* using that dog to track me."

Dumbledore shrugged. "Sometimes simple Muggle methods work best. Not that it was easy to track a golden griffin, especially one in flight, but I also had a feeling you would come back here..."

Harry gasped, then remembered the time he'd transformed, then looked up to see the caretaker standing at the open back door of Hagrid's old cabin. He'd wondered whether Dumbledore had seen him change, and now he knew....

He sat down wearily, defeated. "I know you think I shouldn't change the timelines...."

"On the contrary, Harry. I wanted to make sure *you* were really sure about it. You needed someone to give you the other side, to play devil's advocate. You needed to firm up your resolve. You've lived in this life while being aware of your other life for seven months now. I thought that if you really wanted to change it back, you would have done it already. I suppose I wasn't convinced you really wanted to do this."

"And now?"

"And now I am. You've changed, Harry. You've grown."

"Yeah, that'll happen when you get sent to Azkaban when you're sixteen," he said bitterly, unwilling to give the old man the respect he'd previously enjoyed. "That'll happen when the one person you trust above all else stabs you in the back..."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I did what I had to do, Harry. And you did what I suspected you'd be able to do when you escaped. Do you know no one else has ever managed to do that?"

Harry brushed this off. "I know, I know. That still doesn't--I mean, you could have told me that--"

"No," he said firmly. "I couldn't. I did try to convince you to escape from the holding cell at the Ministry. I was serious about that. But you refused. So the alternative was to help Crouch convict you, so you'd be safe in Azkaban until you decided that you *really* needed to fix the timelines...."

"Fix--so you're really not going to stop me? I thought you said--"

"Devil's advocate, Harry. Devil's advocate." Harry stared at him.

"So you want me to do this?"

"Yes, Harry. As you said, this world wasn't meant to be. And when you've done that--"

"Yes?"

"Promise me you'll never tamper with time again?"

Harry thought of the Time Turner and the *Tempus Fugit* spell that had allowed him to hide Voldemort's wand and save Ginny's life. "Well--I promise never to do this spell again."

Dumbledore smiled ruefully. "At least you're being honest."

"I couldn't anyway--it works best with brother wands, and in my old life, I would still need to do it with Voldemort, which is something I do *not* want to do again...."

"So," Dumbledore said musingly, "you have Voldemort's wand stashed away at Dover?"

"Um, yeah. Right."

"I see. You realize, of course, that he has figured out that he no longer has his proper wand, and that it was not Barty Crouch, Jr. who took it, don't you?"

Harry swallowed. "Oh. He does?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Why do you think the Death Eaters are after you?"

Harry shook. Oh dear. Would he be *able* to get to the wand? Or would Death Eaters be all over the place at Dover?

He lifted his eyes to the old man he had cursed numerous times since being sent to prison, the old wizard about whom he no longer had any good or positive thoughts, because the dementors had sucked them all out of him.

"Please," he said softly to him, looking into his eyes pleadingly. "Please help me."

Chapter Fifteen

Wanted

"Please help me."

Dumbledore looked down at him kindly. "Of course, Harry. I have a few items which will be very useful to you, as well as some advice. First, the advice--do magic as little as possible. The magical items I will be giving you are not things that the Ministry is able to detect, and you needn't worry about them detecting your Animagus transfiguration either. If they could do that, most Animagi wouldn't be unregistered."

"They are?"

Dumbledore sighed. "There are only eight Animagi this century, if you believe the registry. Your godfather was the eighth to register, but Pettigrew never did. He would have been nine. I know of three other people besides you, and there are probably others of whom I have no knowledge...."

"Plus there's Rita Skeeter."

"That reporter?"

Harry nodded. "She's a beetle. Gets some good stories that way. And there was my father, who never registered before he died, either."

"Your father? James Potter?"

Harry nodded. "He could become a stag."

It was Dumbledore's turn to nod now. "So you see what I mean. My point is, if you use your wands, you are taking the chance that you will be discovered. Do not let yourselves be tempted."

Harry grimaced. "I--I did some wandless magic when I was in Fraserburgh, and no one seemed to notice."

Dumbledore frowned and rubbed his chin. "Well, that has a different signature, more like accidental magic, and they're not usually monitoring for that unless they know a Muggle-born is in the vicinity. Fraserburgh is practically the ends of the earth as far as the Ministry is concerned, so I doubt they pay much attention to goings on there. They will be now, of course, but it seems you managed to slip between the cracks."

Draco jerked his head up. "The Muggle-borns! Harry doesn't know!"

Dumbledore's mouth grew very thin. "Yes. The Board has reinstated the ban. Because of your escape."

"What?"

Dumbledore gestured to the entrance of the cave. "Can you see them permitting Muggle-born students to come to Hogwarts with dementors all around the castle?"

Harry put his head in his hands. This couldn't be happening, it couldn't....

"But Harry," Draco said, brightening. "We can go to them for help. They would have been coming here in a few weeks, but now they won't be."

"What about--what about memory charms? Will the Ministry take away their memories of being magical?" His voice shook. How could he show up on Ruth's or Alicia's or Hermione's doorsteps if they didn't know they were magical?

"That's the good news. The Ministry will only put memory charms on Muggles who witness accidental magic. One small bit of progress has been that the Ministry now sees the wisdom in all witches and wizards knowing that they are magical, regardless of birth. There has already been a decline in accidental magic incidents, because the Muggle-borns are now aware of the consequences of letting themselves be--agitated. It has made the Ministry's job much easier; of course, it has also freed up some additional Ministry employees to look for you. And soon they will become aware that you are not in any of the coastal communities nor the Orkneys or Shetlands. All fishing vessels in the North Sea have also been thoroughly searched by Aurors passing for Muggle authorities, ostensibly looking for drugs. Soon they will move inland and south. As soon as it is dark, you both need to go back through the forest under the Invisibility Cloak and make for Huntly--"

"Harry has almost a hundred pounds in Muggle money," Draco added helpfully. Dumbledore looked surprised.

"Did you use magic to get it?" he asked sternly. Harry nodded sheepishly.

"But I was paid," he added hastily. "I didn't just use magic to get it to fly out of someone's pocket and into mine."

Draco looked like he was suppressing a smirk. "Well, not exactly...." Harry hit him with the back of his hand.

"Nonetheless," Dumbledore said, "*no more of that*. You will need most of that to get to Edinburgh. You can go by train and be well ahead of the Ministry, as they will not expect you to have gone so far so fast. From there--well, this will help you to decide what is best--"

He took a scroll out of his pocket and handed it to Harry; he unrolled it and discovered a map of Great Britain with small blue dots exploding on it

constantly, but concentrated generally in the same places. Every so often pink dots appeared, to be swiftly followed by blue dots. What Harry now understood to be the location of Hogwarts--the far west of Aberdeenshire--had a medium-sized blue dot that remained more or less constant instead of disappearing and reappearing. Harry thought he knew what he was holding in his hands, but he looked to Dumbledore for confirmation.

"Yes, Harry. I nicked it from the Ministry. And while it takes the Ministry some time to reckon exactly where accidental magic has occurred--local Ministry offices have small, more precise versions of this map--you needn't worry about that kind of precision. This will be enough to allow you to generally avoid any area where there is significant official magical activity. You may assume that a good deal of blue indicates the presence of Aurors or a large enough concentration of witches and wizards such that you risk someone recognizing you or Draco. Which brings me to another problem--"

He took out his wand and said, "*Incisio*," very business-like. Then he stepped toward Draco and suddenly reached out and picked up the hair hanging limply by the side of his face. He snipped it off with the scissors that had sprouted from his wand tip.

"Hey!" Draco yelled, jerking away.

"This is necessary. Two reasons. First, I need your hair to take your place at the castle. I need it to put in some potion--"

'Polyjuice Potion?' Harry asked. Dumbledore looked startled.

"How do you--" but then he stopped. "Right. Never mind. The second reason is that you can't look like yourself. If we don't do this and you disappear from Hogwarts to travel with Harry looking like *you*, the pair of you will be spotted in no time. This way, I can impersonate you enough hours every day that you aren't missed, and with your hair cut as short as possible, Harry will be even less conspicuous with you than when he was by himself. The Aurors aren't looking for two people traveling together."

Draco looked at the hair in Dumbledore's hand in disbelief. "You're not--not going to take *all* of it?"

Dumbledore nodded. "If you stop shaving, will you have much facial hair?"

Draco grimaced. "Slowly, yeah. It's pretty fair, though."

"Hold still." Dumbledore stepped forward and went over Draco's head ruthlessly. The fair hair fell to the cave floor in showers. Harry moved closer, holding his lit wand up so the old wizard could see what he was doing. Draco squeezed his eyes tightly shut, and then his mouth too, after some hair went in. He was sputtering for a few minutes, trying to get it

out. Finally, Dumbledore stepped back and took a velvet drawstring sack out of his pocket. He opened the cloth sack, and, ending the scissors charm he'd placed on his own wand, he said, "Accio!" whereupon, all of Draco's hair magically flew into the bag, which he closed and put in his pocket. There was not a single stray hair on the ground or Draco's clothes. Harry stared in disbelief at his friend. He looked--

"Well?" he said expectantly. "How do I look?" Harry stared at him, goggle-eyed, then shifted his gaze to Dumbledore, hoping he would answer first, but now Draco gazed at him, his eyebrows raised. "Well, Harry?"

"Well, you look like--" Harry grimaced. He didn't want to say.

"What?"

"Well--rather like a skinhead. It's not like you can help it. No, wait, I didn't mean it that way. I mean--you're so pale and fair-haired, and now the hair is so short--It's, um, it's likely to be a very effective disguise. If I hadn't just seen you get your hair cut, I don't think *I'd* know it was you."

Draco dropped his jaw. "You didn't say one good thing. I look like a freak, don't I? Don't I?" His voice shook. Harry looked to Dumbledore.

"It will grow out, my boy. In the meantime, as Harry noted, you no longer look very much like yourself. And as I will be here at the castle impersonating you as you appeared before, the authorities will not be looking for anyone with this appearance or your previous appearance. You will get used to it. Stop fussing about your looks. We have other things to discuss."

He conjured some small stools by transfiguring some stones scattered about the cave. "Sit. Let me show you what else you will have on your journey. These things will make it possible for you to avoid Muggles altogether. Harry, I do not recommend that you look up those Muggle-born witches and wizards you know. The less contact you have with anyone, the better. If you need someone in an emergency, you know where they are, but please do not do it unless you absolutely have to."

He took a paper sack out of his pocket and unfolded it, then put his hand inside, nodded, and folded down the top and handed it to Harry; it felt as though it were quite full. Perplexed, Harry opened it and looked inside. He saw several sandwiches, two apples, some hard-cooked eggs and what looked like shortbread. He looked up at Dumbledore, smiling.

"That's wonderful! I remember dad reading us a fairy tale when we were small--was it Hans Christian Anderson?--and in the story was a sack that had a perpetual supply of food in it."

"Yes, well, witches and wizards have been doing that for long trips for quite some time. Mr. Anderson was a wizard, and he probably should not have divulged some of these practices, but as most Muggles do not take it seriously, there has been very little harm done. Three times a day you will get an appropriate meal from this sack, enough to feed both of you. And to drink--" He pulled a thermal carafe from somewhere else inside his robes; "--some tea. With just sugar. Milk is difficult; there is the risk of it curdling."

"Just sugar is fine," Harry said, taking the carafe gratefully. It looked like any Muggle thermal carafe, with two nested plastic cups on top of the screw-on lid. Harry opened it and breathed in the comforting aroma of Earl Grey. His dad was partial to Earl Grey. He replaced the lid, refraining from asking whether the Ministry would frown on a Muggle artifact being enchanted to provide a perpetual supply of sweetened tea. He could ask the same thing about the paper sack as well, but he didn't.

"And finally," Dumbledore said, impossibly removing yet another object from inside his robes, "I brought you one of the tents left over from the General Strike. It sleeps two--in bunks--and it has a table and two chairs. It looks like a little thing when it's set up; it shouldn't be hard to hide in some bushes. I added a Muggle-repelling charm to it. That will help. But, of course, *that* won't be effective on witches and wizards."

"You mean on Aurors," Harry said, remembering the Longbottoms and the Muggle police titles they were using.

"And Death Eaters," Dumbledore added. Right, Harry thought, his head swimming at the thought of all of the people trying to kill or capture him.

Draco clapped his hands together. "This isn't as bad as I thought it would be. Looks like we're going to be traveling in style. Er--exactly how *are* we traveling?"

"By train as far as Edinburgh. After that--on foot and on the wing." He winked at Harry. Draco looked perplexed.

"On the wing? You mean--"

Harry shuffled. "Sometimes--not all the time, mind you--I'll fly and you can--"

"No."

"What?"

"No. I am not--*straddling* you and--and--"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Get over yourself, Draco. I'm not even sure whether I want to risk much of that. But think about it; we'll also have the Invisibility Cloak. Maybe we can manage to get some free bus rides out of that."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Too risky. People can bang into you very, very easily, and then where would you be? And even though a bus looks mostly empty, it only takes a few stops for it to be bursting at the seams. I don't recommend it."

Harry frowned. "What about the Knight Bus?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "And how would you get the Knight Bus without arousing suspicion? If you hail it and it comes and finds no one because you are under the Invisibility Cloak, it will just leave again, without opening the door. If you don't use the cloak, or only one uses the cloak, you still have the problem of your papers."

"Papers?"

"You haven't had to worry about it because you're in school and still underage. But everyone who rides the Knight Bus must present their wizarding identification papers, which cannot be forged or magically duplicated. And even if you went to Malfoy Manor and somehow got Draco's papers out from under his father's nose, then Draco would be traveling as himself, and his age is on the paperwork. It would immediately get back to Hogwarts and the Malfoys that Draco is not in school and that the Draco who had been attending classes in his stead was an impostor. That would be me. We don't want that. I'm sorry, but the Knight Bus is out of the question. You must avoid wizards as much as possible."

Harry sighed, thinking of the long journey. He looked down at the map with mostly blue and a few pink dots appearing and disappearing on it. Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh were labeled on it. So was Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Middlesbrough, York, Manchester, Northampton, Liverpool, Birmingham, Greenwich, London, Oxford and Cardiff. Dover wasn't labeled, but he had a general idea of where it was. And just south of London....He thought a little wistfully of Little Whinging, Surrey, with the tower of St. Bede's and the little hilly cemetery, and the neat circling streets with their manicured lawns and orderly gardens. Gardens....

"Wait!" he said suddenly. "I just thought of something. Aberforth. Could Aberforth help us?"

Draco frowned. "Who's Aberforth?" But Harry wasn't listening to him; he saw the worst expression he'd ever seen on Dumbledore's face, an expression of extreme sadness.

"Dumbledore's brother," he said softly to Draco, not taking his eyes off the old man. Then, taking a chance, he ventured softly, "What happened to him?"

Dumbledore sighed, and Harry had the feeling that he hadn't been the same since whatever-it-was happened to his brother. Maybe that was why he seemed so different in this world....

"He was killed. Five years ago. Death Eaters. He was trying to protect some Muggle friends of his. They managed to get away. He succeeded. The Death Eaters in question were just fooling around, Muggle-baiting, you know how juvenile they are. They had no idea a wizard was in the group."

Harry nodded and said softly, "He was my friend. Is my friend, in my other life. I worked for him--Draco did too. He went by *Dick Abernathy*, ran *Abernathy Landscaping*."

Dumbledore nodded. "He started that years ago. The men he was protecting were his workers. They were in a pub at the end of the day, having a few pints. The Ministry had to seek out all of the people who were there to put Memory Charms on them. Messy business. I had to oversee his assets being liquidated; I divided it all equally among his employees so they'd have something to live on until they found other work. They had a hard time of it; many people in the Muggle world were out of work." He sighed. "And here we are in the wizarding world with a labor shortage...." He shook his head.

Then Harry remembered the letter from his stepfather. "Please sir--when Ginny and Jamie and Simon were attacked by Binns--what happened?" He was half afraid he didn't want to know, but on the other hand....

Dumbledore shook his head again, looking pityingly at Harry. "Your little brother was very rebellious about being confined with his sister and Ginny. When I arrived, Binns had killed the girls and was putting Cruciatus on Simon, but Simon wasn't 'gone' yet. I stunned Binns, and when some minutes had passed and he was slightly calmer, I was able to ask Simon what had occurred. He told me that he had attempted to leave through the passage that Ron Weasley had used previously. When he reached the classroom, Professor Binns was waiting, and he overpowered Simon and brought him back up to the hiding place. When Ginny saw them enter the space the three of them used as a common room, she tried to hex Binns, but he pulled Simon in front of him as a shield. He killed Ginny very quickly after that, as she wasn't willing to risk hitting Simon. Then, when he attempted to put Cruciatus on Jamie, Simon got away from Binns and took the brunt of the curse. Poor boy."

"He's only twelve," Harry breathed, trying not to think of his little brother experiencing the agony he'd undergone in the graveyard, standing on top

of the grave of Voldemort's Muggle father. He'd done it to protect his sister, *their* sister. Harry also felt a pride blossoming inside him; how many twelve-year-olds would take the Cruciatus Curse for anyone? And yet for Jamie, that was exactly what he'd done....

"Then he tried to kill Simon, in a rage, and Jamie threw *herself* between him and the curse; she died instantly. Binns decided to torture Simon some more, and had his wand aimed at him when I entered. I stunned Binns immediately and asked Simon to tell me what had occurred. When Simon had finished explaining everything, I revived Binns so that I could question him." His voice grew softer and he ran his hand over his face. "That was my mistake. He pulled out his wand again and put Cruciatus on Simon once more. It worked--and it didn't. Simon was clearly in agony, but somehow, the curse also rebounded on Binns, and I could see that he was under the spell as well. It was this final time that--that destroyed Simon's mind." He swallowed and bowed his head; Harry had never seen him like this.

"I used the ultimate force to break the bond between Binns and Simon." His voice broke. "I have only done that in extreme cases, and I felt that the fact that he had killed two young girls and was torturing a twelve-year-old boy was adequate defense for my actions." Yet Harry could not help think that Dumbledore did not look justified; he wanted to think he wouldn't do that, that he wouldn't sink to the level of the Death Eaters, or even Barty Crouch. Harry thought again of his description of Aberforth's death. He'd become numb during these extra fifteen years of terror under Voldemort. This was definitely a different Albus Dumbledore. Harry thought of Ginny trying to protect Jamie and Simon, and Jamie and Simon trying to protect each other. His throat was tight.

"I will make myself invisible again and return to the castle. Remember--wait until dark. And remember something else; the equinox was over a week ago. The days are getting longer now. That means you won't be as cold as you were during the General Strike, but it also means that if you are going to travel by flying sometimes, you will have fewer hours of darkness to do it. The best time is probably after one or two in the morning, when almost everyone is asleep. Avoid flying near cities; in cities, there is always someone awake around the clock. Taxicab drivers, for instance. Police. Better not to risk it."

The boys nodded and Dumbledore looked at Harry and Draco fondly. "Don't take this the wrong way, boys, but I never thought I would be helping two Slytherins. I always tried to be impartial when I was headmaster---"

"You were very good to my dad," Harry said quickly. "My stepfather, I mean. When other students gave him trouble--"

Dumbledore smiled and nodded. "Ah, yes. I remember. Well, it has been many years since he has had to withstand that, thank goodness, although I do still hear rumblings now and again about students wondering whether he is a vampire....At any rate, I have complete confidence in you. Just don't do anything unnecessarily risky and you should be fine."

Right, Harry thought. Don't be alive. Unnecessarily risky. But he smiled feebly at the old wizard as he disappeared in a silvery-gold shimmer.

They were on their own.

* * * * *

Even though they were under cover of night, they walked to the forest beneath the Invisibility Cloak. Before they had left the cave, Harry transfigured Draco's robes into a long dark coat so he could pass in the Muggle world. Dumbledore had used magic in the cave; Harry reckoned one last spell wouldn't be of particular concern.

Once in the forest, Harry changed into his Animagus form and Draco kept the cloak on, carrying the diary, tent, food sack and carafe of tea. He walked by Harry's side as his large padded paws came down on the mulchy dead leaves and old bracken that littered the forest floor. Once or twice, Harry saw eyes glow in the darkness, probably something that smelled Draco, all tender and clawless and *human*, but Harry would turn and send a low growl at whatever the thing was, and it soon backed off and they walked on in peace.

It was almost morning when they reached the Gartly side of the forest; the sun was just starting to make the cloudy sky a little paler in the east. Harry transfigured again and the two of them emerged from the trees, then sat on the cold, dew-wet grass to eat some breakfast, passing the tea back and forth in a friendly fashion. Harry looked up at the blank, overcast sky and then down at the tiny village of Gartly as he chewed, feeling oddly content. There were worse things he could think of besides traveling with his best friend. But then he remembered the diary.

"Draco," he said when they were done eating. "We should start having you write in the diary."

Draco folded up the paper sack again and put it back into his pocket. He was sitting on his coat that used to be wizarding robes, using it for a picnic blanket. "Fine. What do I write?"

"Well, we need to start with a good bit of background. And we have to let him know we know who he is."

"Okay...."

"Get out a quill and the diary and write what I say," Harry told him.

Draco readied himself. With the point of the quill poised over the paper, he said, "Just don't talk too fast."

"I'll try. Okay: 31 March, 1997. My name is Draco Malfoy. My best friend is Harry Potter. We are both faithful Death Eaters, followers of Lord Voldemort, who is no more. We know whose diary this was. We are on a quest to restore our Master to us, and we need your help, Tom Riddle."

His tongue between his teeth, Draco painstakingly wrote all this. It took far longer than Harry expected it to. They waited, and soon the words Draco had written disappeared into the page where he'd written it. Other words in a hand Harry recognized from his other life soon appeared on the page as though written by an invisible quill.

Hello, Draco Malfoy. I am gratified to learn that I will have such loyal servants. How did I come to be conquered?

Draco looked up at Harry, uncertain. "What do I write now?"

"Get ready," Harry told him. Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Harry is very ashamed of his connection to the person who is responsible. It was his mother, a very powerful Auror whom Harry has killed in retribution. Unfortunately, that has not brought back our Master. Harry was sent to Azkaban for killing his mother, but he has escaped and come back to Hogwarts, where we were sixth-year students. I am going to help him bring you back."

When Draco was done, he looked up at Harry, his eyes narrowed. "Why are you telling him all this?"

Harry looked at him very earnestly. "I need to, for credibility. A lot of it is true, like my being sent to Azkaban for killing my mother, and then escaping, and her having been an Auror. And it's true that in my other life, she was responsible for his fall. The fewer lies we tell, even to Tom Riddle, the fewer we have to remember. Of course, we're twisting the truth to our purpose, but parts of it are still true."

The words Draco had written faded like the others, and a new message now appeared.

How can I help?

Harry looked at the words, then lifted his eyes to Draco's, a lopsided smile across his face.

"He's bought it."

Harry instructed Draco to write:

You fell at Dover. Harry hid your wand when it happened. We have to go back there to get it, so that once we make you strong enough to emerge from this diary, you will have your proper wand to use. We are in Gartly now, trying to get to Huntly to get the train to Aberdeen and then Edinburgh. Will write more later.

Draco closed the book and looked up at Harry. He took a deep breath.
"Well, I don't feel a lot weaker or anything. I feel okay. And since he knows we're not at Hogwarts, he probably won't be trying to get me to open the Chamber of Secrets."

"See? That's why I wanted to tell him all that stuff about me and my mum. As far as he knows, we're his loyal servants coming to him for help. Just make sure nothing happens to that book. Give it to me; this jacket has enormous inside pockets. I'll carry it."

Draco nodded and handed it over with the quill. They wandered through fields along the road from Gartly to Huntly, stopping to eat about half-way through the day, finally reaching Huntly at sundown. They'd walked all day, slowing down as time had passed and fatigue had taken its toll. Harry had wanted to move faster, but he found that Draco was not accustomed to walking, and in addition to walking all day, stopping only occasionally to rest, they'd also walked all night to get through the forest. They had stopped again to eat, but they were both exhausted. It wasn't difficult to find the train station, and find out when the next train was leaving for Aberdeen. Their tickets would take them all the way to Edinburgh, but they had to change trains at Aberdeen. The tickets took most of Harry's money; he had less than twenty pounds left, since he'd also spent some on the food he'd eaten between Fraserburgh and Huntly. Draco looked very concerned about this.

"How much have you got now?"

"Eighteen quid, sixty p."

"Quid? I thought Muggles used 'pounds.'"

"Same thing. Slang."

"Oh." He was silent for a moment. "What's 'p?'"

"Pence. Forty pence more and we'd have nineteen quid. I mean, nineteen pounds."

"Oh. How much is that in Galleons?"

"Less than four. And don't use that word. No wizarding terms. We're in the Muggle world." He made a face. "For that matter, neither one of us should use the 'M' word, either."

It was seven o'clock in the evening, and Harry and Draco collapsed onto a bench on the platform. They had a wait of over an hour before their train would be leaving. Harry fought the sleep he felt creeping over him; they could sleep on the train, he'd told Draco. It wouldn't do to fall asleep sitting on the platform and *miss* the train. Or to let their guard down and be ambushed by Aurors or Death Eaters.

When it was close to seven-thirty, Harry jerked his head up suddenly; he'd started to doze off again. He looked at Draco beside him; Draco's chin was on his chest and he was snoring loudly. Harry gave him an elbow in the ribs and he too jerked his head up.

"I wasn't asleep!" he exclaimed in a strangled voice. Harry laughed.

"Well, you've never snored that loudly while *awake*."

Draco groaned and rubbed his hand over his face. "Considering we don't have to sit for exams or do homework, you'd think we'd be able to get more sleep."

"We will, when we're safely away from here. We've done a lot of walking in the last twenty-four hours. We'll get a chance to rest."

Draco nodded, although he looked unconvinced. Then Harry saw them; they strode onto the platform, purposefully walking up to people, pulling out their cards and talking earnestly, then taking out a photograph and waiting while each person looking at it considered whether they'd seen the young man depicted.

Harry turned from them and whispered frantically to Draco, "Where's the timetable?" Draco removed it from his pocket and handed it to him. Harry checked; the train to Inverness was due in ten minutes. Good. If he didn't get hit by a curse or hex, this could work, and Aurors probably wouldn't do that on a crowded train, even if they could do memory charms afterward....

"What?" Draco said to him. "You've got that look on your face, like you're planning something. I've learned to hate that look. It means I'm going to have to do something I don't want to do."

Harry smiled at him. "No it doesn't. This one will be all me. Give me the cloak." Draco withdrew it from his pocket and handed it to Harry. "Now, give me your coat and you put on my jacket. Very slowly; don't call attention." They made the switch as discreetly as possible. The

Longbottoms were about thirty feet away from them; twenty or more passengers were between them and the Aurors.

"Why are you doing this, Har--"

"Sssh! Are you crazy? You can't call me that," he whispered fiercely. Draco looked taken aback. Harry calmed down. "I'm Dudley Dursley. And you're--Piers Polkiss. Got that?"

"I'm what?"

"That's your alias. Anyway, don't you see who's over there?" Harry leaned to the side so Draco could see around him. Draco's eyes widened when he saw who it was.

"Damn! What are you going to do?"

"Watch."

Harry rose and nonchalantly walked to the stairs that led to the other side of the platform, for trains going to Elgin and Inverness. He found the W.C. on the northbound side and ducked in there. There were two stalls, each requiring money for their use. It didn't matter; he leaned against the door and quickly transfigured Draco's coat back into wizarding robes and he concentrated very hard on his hair and beard, shrinking them again, so that he would look as he did in the photo the Longbottoms were showing people. When he heard the train for Inverness pulling into the station, he opened the door. He was visible for a few seconds before the train obscured him from their sight, and during this time he tried to get the attention of the Longbottoms on the other side of the tracks.

"Hello there! Looking for me?" he cried cockily, waving to them and grinning. He saw their shocked faces for only a moment before the train got in the way, and when it came to a full stop, he waited for the doors to open and pushed past the people waiting at the head of the queue, dashing down the center aisle of the empty modern train car, then stopping in the middle, leaning over to look out the windows, waiting, waiting....

There they were, panting slightly, having run from the other platform. He waved at them again, and then he saw Frank Longbottom push past the other people in the queue as Harry had done. The waiting passengers were far less tolerant of this now; they'd already had to put up with one cheeky young man, but the fact that this one was screaming about being 'D.C.I. Longbottom' did not matter to them; he was still being cheeky. Harry ducked down and put on the Invisibility Cloak, then moved across the aisle, unseen. Frank Longbottom came running down the aisle, and Harry saw that he had something in his hand; when he'd boarded the

train, he'd drawn his wand. He was only three feet away from Harry; who could have reached out and grabbed the Auror's foot.

Longbottom looked carelessly over every seat on the car, then went to the window and opened it slightly. "He's not here!" he called to his wife.

"He must be!" she called back. "I've been watching, and he didn't get off! Search the rest of the train--don't forget the W.C.!"

"You keep watch in case he gets leaves!"

He closed the window again; the aisle was filling now with people boarding the train. A young mother with a small girl suddenly turned and tried to sit in the seats where Harry was. He pushed past them, saying "Sorry," quietly, and he had a split second to register the look of shock on the mother's face as she felt the invisible person brush past her and apologize. Longbottom wasn't looking in his direction, and Harry quickly moved down the aisle away from him, looking for another exit. Glancing behind him, he saw that Frank Longbottom had put his wand away when Muggles started boarding, but he was still searching the car with a perplexed look on his face. Harry opened the door at the end of the car, and saw Longbottom swing his head around, then away, when he saw the conductor standing there. Harry froze; the conductor filled the doorway. He was a large bearded man with ginger-colored hair, surveying his kingdom with a propriety that meant you had your ticket ready when he damn well wanted it and not a second later.

Harry was starting to despair of being able to leave the train, but then the conductor stepped into a small compartment to the side, oblivious to the fact that an invisible fugitive wizard was trying to get around him, and when the compartment door labeled *Conductor* had closed, Harry stepped between the cars and in a trice he was back on the platform. Gemma Longbottom turned and seemed to look right at him, but when he too turned, he saw that she was looking at a bespectacled young woman with short dark hair who did look slightly similar to Harry (she was even wearing a long dark coat), if you didn't look closely enough to discern her lighter frame and shorter build; it was a superficial resemblance. He saw that 'D.I Longbottom' had realized her mistake immediately and she continued scanning the other entrances to the train. At length, her husband came to the doorway through which he'd entered the car and called to her, "Get on! We may need the whole trip to find him! I'll alert the conductors that we're on official business, but we'll buy tickets on board if we need to."

She nodded and followed him onto the train. Not until the doors were all thoroughly closed and the train was moving out of the station did Harry heave a sigh of relief and return to the W.C. He took off the cloak and grew out his hair and beard again and transfigured the robes back into a long coat. Anyone monitoring the Hurntly train station for magical activity

would soon learn that Harry had been seen there, and that the Longbottoms were there too, and had gotten on the same train as Harry, so that would explain the magical signature.

Shoving the cloak into his pocket, he walked back to the other platform where Draco was waiting, looking anxious. He was startled when Harry sat down next to him again, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"What the hell--? What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting them off our trail, that's what."

"That's why you changed back to the way you usually look?"

"I couldn't have them seeing me looking like this, could I? They think they're looking for someone who matches that photograph. They must have done something to it so it wouldn't move. Anyway, they're going to be stuck on that train for a while, since they can't Apparate on or off of a moving vehicle."

Draco whistled appreciatively and looked at the disappearing train, far down the track now. "Where'd you send them?"

"Inverness. Not exactly close to Aberdeen or Edinburgh." He was having a very hard time not grinning, and now Draco found himself doing the same.

"How exactly did they get to be Aurors?"

Harry shrugged. "Beats me...."

When their train pulled in, they calmly boarded, found seats, and settled back for a comfortable, pursuit-free trip to Aberdeen....

* * * * *

The trip to Aberdeen took a little less than an hour, but they had just missed a connecting train to Edinburgh and the next one wasn't for almost another hour. They dipped into the food sack again, each withdrawing some shortbread to eat with the sweet tea, which was starting to grate on Harry.

When they were done their tea, they wrote in the diary some more, telling Riddle that they were in Aberdeen. He wanted to know some more about what a great Dark Lord he'd become.

"Just tell him whatever you can remember about things he's done....Oh, and mention the Squibs disappearing. He'll like that." Draco nodded, his tongue between his teeth while he wrote. Harry watched over his

shoulder, to make sure Draco wasn't going to lose his head already and write something about their real intent, to change the timelines. Riddle was suitably impressed with himself, as Harry knew he'd be, and they closed the diary before boarding the train to Edinburgh. It would be after midnight by the time they reached the city, and the strain of the previous twenty-four hours was finally catching up to Harry. He leaned his head on the window while next to him, Draco's head had sunk onto his chest and he was already snoring again. Harry felt the train swaying as they sped into the night....

* * * * *

Harry had never been unsupervised in a large city after midnight. Edinburgh seemed even more confusing than London, if that was possible. The streets were very hilly and winding, and many of them were cobbled toward the center, which was starting to hurt Harry's feet. They had merely asked which way was south before leaving the station, and had begun to walk doggedly through the night. Harry was not convinced, after a time, that they were still traveling south, but continuing to move seemed safer than stopping, let alone daring to talk to someone else. At length, he looked around and realized that something was familiar. *I've been here before.*

"That's City Chambers," he said slowly, pointing. He turned. "And St. Giles Cathedral."

Draco leaned against a wall, drooping wearily. "So? Can we sleep in either of them?"

"And that's Mercat Cross," Harry continued dreamily, as though Draco hadn't spoken. Then he made a face. "I remember being here. When I was nine. Mum and Dad brought us on holiday, and we were here....we went on a tour of some kind, some underground rooms near South Bridge...."

He reached into the recesses of his mind, trying to retrace his steps, trying to remember small details from a time when they'd been a family, when his mother wasn't trying to make him and the world doubt him. Draco followed him as he continued to walk forward, a trance-like expression on his face.

"Harry, are you sure--"

"Ssssh!"

When they eventually reached it, Harry ran his hands over the wall. "It's actually run by wizards, but they let Muggles come to see it too. They pay, of course, but this is the wizarding entrance. Let me see...." He continued to run his hands over the wall, trying to remember, remember....then he

touched a small stone which he was able to depress like a button. The wall slid open and they were looking at a set of stone stairs leading downward. They lit their wands, trusting that Edinburgh was a large enough city for the Ministry to be unconcerned about a couple of wizards needing lighting.

"Come on," Harry said to Draco, who followed him cautiously. "They do tours in the morning, so we have to be out of here by the time they start, but we should be able to sleep here tonight without being disturbed."

The wall slid closed behind Draco and they descended the stairs. "These rooms were only discovered a few years before we came on holiday. They were forgotten for a couple of centuries."

Draco frowned, looked at the stalactites that clearly indicated the infiltration of excessive moisture. "What were they for?"

"All kinds of stuff. Workshops, cellars, even housing for businesses on South Bridge, which is above us now. I think they were abandoned because of the damp." They passed through room after room, high vaulted ceilings making them feel very small, fireplaces cold and dark. More stalactites pointed down at them; Harry remembered being convinced when he was nine that they were going to come crashing down on his head any moment. He pointed at them. "That's from the damp." Draco nodded. They saw the many artifacts left on display for visitors, the crucibles for smelting metal, animal bones from two-hundred-year-old suppers, hand-blown wine bottles, leather shoes. They settled at last in a dark corner of a vaulted chamber. Harry looked up, frowning, at a strange stone. He increased the illumination level of his wand and stared at it. It was long and sturdy, as though it had been a door lintel in some previous life and was being reused here. Words were carved into it, the letters actually raised rather than recessed. Draco saw where he was looking and read the legend.

"The Lord is my refuge and helper." There was a small heraldic device, and the initials A.C. "Wonder what that's all about?"

Harry shrugged. "No one pointed it out to us when we were on holiday."

"Eh. Maybe they haven't even noticed it yet. The ones doing the tours."

Harry nodded and helped Draco set up the tent. It looked like a toy, no more than three feet high, but when they had crawled inside, it was spacious, and Harry had to struggle just a bit to climb up into his bunk, accidentally treading on Draco's hand in the process.

"Ow!"

"Sorry!" Harry called down to him. They'd both put out their wands and now the dark engulfed them. They could hear the gentle *drip drip* of the

water that continued to maintain the stalactites they'd seen, but the hustle and bustle of the city was far away. For now, Harry was content to let the old stone rooms under the South Bridge be his refuge, and he would be his own helper.

* * * *

They were up early, and left the stone rooms and the rest of Edinburgh behind them as soon as they could. Walking quickly, Harry carrying the tent and Invisibility Cloak, Draco carrying the food and drink, they soon learned to avoid the roads and well-tended gardens, crossing fields instead, as a number of well-intentioned people tried to stop to offer them rides. After this happened for the fourth time, Draco rebelled.

"Damn it, Harry, *you* may want to walk to London, but I sure as hell don't!"

Harry stopped, which was actually something of an effort, after all the walking he'd done the day before, he felt as though his legs were on auto-pilot. "Draco, we can't afford to do that. First, anyone picking us up is going to want our story, which would be full of lies, and if they figured that out, they'd immediately suspect us and tell the police to look out for us. Second, anyone can be an Auror or Death Eater; we can't take chances. Third, even if we got a lift from someone who wasn't a wizard and didn't want our life stories, if Death Eaters catch with us while we're with an innocent Muggle, that's someone else's life we're responsible for. *No rides*," he said firmly. "We'll make it up at night, when I can fly for a while. That's the schedule we worked out: we walk from noon to six o'clock; we rest until midnight, we fly from midnight to six, with hourly stops so I don't give out completely, then we rest again from six to noon. And when we rest, you spend some time writing in the diary."

Draco grimaced, unscrewing the top of the carafe and pouring some tea into one of the plastic cups, handing it to Harry, then pouring some for himself. "Yeah, yeah. I know. It just seems a bloody shame to waste all these offers we're getting. That last girl looked like she quite fancied me...."

Harry rolled his eyes, finishing his tea and handing the cup back to Draco. "We're not on a mission to get you a new girlfriend, Draco, in case you haven't forgotten."

Draco threw the rest of his tea onto a thorny bush and slung the carafe on his back again after he'd replaced the cup. "I know. More's the pity..."

Harry almost mentioned Jamie for a moment, but then thought better of it. Draco was coping in his own way. He turned and walked forward again and was already several yards ahead of Draco when he turned and motioned to him. "Come on! We haven't all the time in the world!"

Draco grumbled but resumed walking.

"What did you say?" Harry said, his eyebrows raised. "Did I hear the word 'wanker'?"

"I was calling you rude names."

"I got that. Do you feel better?"

"No. Sitting in a nice Muggle car speeding down the road would make me feel better."

Harry looked sympathetically at his friend. "We're just starting out. We'll get into a rhythm. It'll be fine, you'll see. We've got food, drink and our own portable lodging. We don't need anyone. Just don't think about cars and you'll be fine."

They stopped occasionally to write in the diary, so they could keep Tom Riddle apprised of their progress toward Dover. Harry reckoned every little bit of information they could give that was factual would make him trust them even more. So when they passed through Duddingston and then Niddrie about half an hour later, they entered those names, followed by Old Craighall and Eskbank (avoiding the larger town of Dalkeith). They'd already gone from Edinburgh through part of East Lothian and were now in Midlothian. After they crossed the South Esk, they didn't come to another town until Carrington. They were trying to avoid more populous areas still, and it had taken them five hours to go around fifteen miles. They pushed on to Temple, which took another half hour, and then they spent another half hour beyond that trudging along the South Esk toward Rosebery.

At six o'clock precisely (Harry noticed that Draco had been checking his watch every minute or so for the previous hour) Draco promptly sat down on the ground and announced, "There! We did it! Walked for six hours, not counting stops. I'll log it in the diary. Where do you reckon we are?"

Harry had wanted to get to Rosebery, but he knew that Draco wasn't going to budge. "About half-way between Temple and Rosebery."

Draco nodded and took out the diary, saying, "Hello again, Tom-me-lad," and opening it to a blank page, preparing to write. Harry frowned. He couldn't pinpoint what exactly he felt was worrisome about Draco's attitude toward the diary. The story they'd fed Riddle seemed to be believed. He did worry about whether Draco was starting to think of him as a friend (he'd been trading jokes back and forth with the young Riddle the last couple of times he'd written down the names of the places they'd passed), and whether he would feel obligated at some point to tell him the truth. Harry had seen the way Riddle had controlled Ginny, and although there was a difference between an eleven-year-old girl and an almost-

seventeen-year-old Draco Malfoy, still--he worried just a bit about how much Riddle might soon be able to control Draco.

They set up the tent in a small copse of trees. It was a relief to be indoors after the day of walking. Harry's legs and feet were very, very sore now. He took off his socks and shoes with enormous relief, wiggling his toes and sighing. After having sandwiches and tea, they each climbed into a bunk, Harry choosing the upper one again.

"G'night, Draco."

"G'night, Harry."

Harry stared at the tent above him for some time, wondering whether they could really do this, wondering whether Riddle would really believe everything Draco wrote....but soon, he thought nothing at all, and when he opened his eyes again, it was very dark. He thought about lighting his wand, but decided it was too risky; this wasn't as populous an area as Edinburgh. He wished Dumbledore had given them an electric torch, or at least a kerosene camping lantern. He climbed down to the floor; somehow, he had the feeling it was around midnight. He called to Draco in the dark, and finally heard some grumbling.

"Shut yer gob, Harry. M'tryin' t'sleep..."

"Time to get up. You're the one who has it easy at night. You just have to hold on while I do all the work."

"Yeah, yeah, as if holding on isn't work...."

Harry had already transfigured into a griffin; he found it easier to see in the dark with his griffin's eyes. He saw Draco sit up now and rub the sleep from his eyes, then, apparently, his eyes adjusted to the dimness, and he screamed. Harry immediately became human again.

"Draco! What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded in a fierce whisper.

"What do *I* think *I'm* doing? What do you think *you're* about, sitting there looking like a lion when I'm still half asleep? Are you *trying* to scare me to death? Because it very nearly worked."

Harry shrugged. "You'll get used to it. Come on. Let's pack up." Soon the tent, food sack and carafe were slung across Draco's back and Harry prepared to transfigure again. "What time is it?"

Draco checked his watch. "Twelve-twenty."

"All right; we've already lost twenty minutes. I figured out which way was south when we first camped, so I'm going to head due south, changing direction if it looks like we're headed for an area that's too populous. Let me know when it's one o'clock."

"Right."

Harry transfigured and walked to the edge of the trees, then spread his wings. They were lucky this night; they would be flying across the Moorfoot Hills, so they didn't have to worry about well-lit cities. Harry took a break at one o'clock, very relieved to set down. As soon as he transformed back into a human, he pushed Draco off him.

"Geroff....How heavy are you?"

"About twelve stone and ten."

"Ergh," was Harry's only response. He hadn't counted on how hard it would be to carry his best friend. *Hermione was like a feather*, he remembered. She probably didn't even weigh eight stone. Although she *did* panic and grasp his mane rather too hard when they were trying to escape from the Charms classroom....

"Well," he said floundering, "lose some weight. In the next five minutes, preferably." He grunted, sitting up and putting out his hand. "And pass the tea."

Draco passed it to him, grumbling rude names again, which Harry ignored as he took the carafe. Then he started speaking a little louder, and Harry could hear what he was saying now. "It's always *Do this, do that...* Can't even bother with please and thank you...."

Harry took a swig of tea. "We're on a mission," he said gruffly. "Can't be bothered with the niceties. What's up your arse all of a sudden?"

"Nothing," Draco mumbled, getting up to relieve himself in some bushes. Harry wondered again whether it would soon be two-against-one, Draco and Riddle against him. Then he shook himself; that was ridiculous. We'll be all right. We just need to be careful not to let Riddle get in his *head*....

After their rest, they took off again, and after another rest and flight, they'd reached a place called Innerleithen. They walked on a little further and reached the River Tweed and a forest, where they set up the tent. Harry had decided that three hours of flight was all he could take this first night. Perhaps he could do more when he was more accustomed to it.

"I thought we were going to do six?" Draco grumbled.

"Yeah, you try carrying you for six hours at a time, go ahead...."

Draco didn't answer. Harry thought repeatedly of saying something to apologize, to make up with him, but the *I'm sorry* and *Forgive me* wouldn't come out of his mouth, somehow. They retired again without any further discussion. Harry listened to Draco's snoring in the blackness, wondering and worrying. *He's my best friend, Riddle. Not yours*, he thought fiercely. But how he would continue to guarantee this, he had no idea.

* * * *

After flying for only three hours the next night as well, Harry came to the conclusion that he could only fly every other night. This was fine with Draco, as it meant he could sleep longer. Harry hadn't counted on how strenuous the trip would be, and how long it would take. They hadn't seen any pursuers since the Longbottoms were duped into taking the train to Inverness.

After another week, Harry started to notice something strange about Draco. He'd actually starting to notice it when they were in the Scottish Borders, but it didn't start to get really worrisome until they were in Cumbria. On the night of the sixth, they'd flown across Yorkshire Dales National Park, in the heart of Langstrothdale Chase, and when they'd set down, it almost immediately started raining. Draco had kept up a steady stream of expletives while he helped Harry set up the tent, and then went to sleep without saying good night. Harry lay awake for a long time after, wondering whether he should insist that Draco stop writing in the diary; he just didn't seem like himself. Harry was getting very, very worried. He made sure he hung over Draco's shoulder and told him everything to write in the diary, but once when he'd come back from relieving himself, he'd seen Draco quickly putting the diary back into the pocket of the tweed jacket, which Harry had removed while eating lunch; it had been an unseasonably warm day, and the jacket was very heavy. Harry opened his mouth to ask whether Draco had written anything without supervision, but he stopped himself. *I have to trust him*, he told himself. *If he thinks I don't trust him, this will never work.*

Now they'd been walking in the rain for three days. When Draco stopped to write in the diary, he had to find shelter first so the ink wouldn't run. Harry was worried about Draco, and made him stop more often than before. Harry was so worried about his friend, he didn't notice that he had a raging fever until he fell over in a dead faint in Rusholme, Greater Manchester. When he awoke, he was lying on the bottom bunk in the tent, which Draco had evidently set up himself. Draco had been seated at the small table, writing in the diary. Harry groaned and lifted his hand toward him.

"Tea," he managed to gasp between cracked lips. Draco leapt up, but Harry noticed he wasn't as spry as he had been. He fetched the carafe and

helped Harry tip some tea from one of the plastic cups into his mouth. Harry's head was swimming and he felt like he was burning up.

"Don't," he croaked, then licked his arid lips and tried again. "*Don't write in the diary without me*," he finally managed to say. Draco nodded; at least Harry thought he did. Everything before his eyes was jumping about a bit. Draco *could* have nodded....

"Don't worry," his best friend told him. Harry drifted off again; his memories of the following days were cloudy at best, interspersed with vague memories of running to the door of the tent to spew up the tea he'd drunk, which was all he was even trying to put in his body. Then one morning when he awoke, he heard birds chirping and realized that he didn't feel achy and clammy any more. The fever had broken. He looked over at the table; Draco had fallen asleep sitting there, his head pillowled on his arms, one hand on the closed diary. At least, Harry *thought* he was asleep. He looked around; there was no sign of Riddle having emerged from the diary. It seemed terribly soon for that, though. How long had he been ill? Harry wondered. He'd lost all track of time.

Then he noticed that Draco was a rather sickly color, and he put his hand on the clammy forehead; Draco was burning up. It was his turn to be sick.

"Draco!" he cried, suddenly feeling alert and galvanized. "C'mon," he grunted, dragging his friend over to the lower bunk where he'd been lying during his own illness. Draco flopped onto the mattress with a limpness that Harry found alarming. How much had he been writing in the diary? How much of his strength had he given to Riddle? They still needed to get to Dover, then to Wales. It wouldn't do to have Riddle get too strong too soon.

Harry tore a bit off the blanket on the top bunk and left the tent, squinting in the bright early-morning sunshine. Draco had erected the tent in a small stand of trees in a park. Harry found a fountain and moistened the blanket fragment, taking it back to the tent. He was amazed that no one had bothered them all the time they'd been camped out here, but then he remembered the Muggle-repelling charm Dumbledore said he'd put on the tent; any Muggles who thought of approaching would, before they got too close, suddenly realize they had to send a birthday card to their mum or go buy some flowers for a friend in hospital, and afterward, they'd forget all about the tent....

He sat by Draco's side, putting the damp cloth on his forehead while the blond boy thrashed and mumbled nonsense. Harry heard Jamie's name more than once, and he heard Draco mumble, "*That's why you won't have a baby, Jamie....I won't ever be a dad....*"

Had Draco and Jamie slept together? he wondered, trying to stifle the anger he felt welling up in him. When was it? When I was in Azkaban? That's just great....

He tried to forget this. He would ask Draco about it when he was well; this wasn't the time. Harry kept up his vigil for a week, giving Draco sips of tea, watching him dash to the tent door to spew it up, just as he'd done, putting cool cloths on his forehead, and taking a turn writing in the diary, very cautiously. Draco was not recovering as readily as he had, he reckoned, because he'd been weakened by the diary. Harry did not want to risk not being able to continue because Riddle had taken too much of his strength. Perhaps we should divide it in future, he thought. So neither one of us is disastrously weakened or completely controlled by Riddle....

He wrote in the diary:

I'm very worried about Draco. He's been sick more than twice as long as I was. I suppose we're both used to just going to the hospital wing at school and getting Pepper-Up Potion or whatever we need to get well. I don't dare try to find any wizards, though. I'm at my wit's end.

Harry watched the words seep into the paper. There was always a delay, but this time it seemed longer. Finally, Riddle's words appeared.

Get help. Even if it is from Muggles. I can't have the two of you dying before you manage to reach Dover, can I? You must do what is necessary.

Harry was surprised. But then he remembered that Tom Riddle was raised in a Muggle orphanage; he knew that there were times when Muggles had their uses. It was just pragmatism, pure and simple.

Actually, Harry wrote, I know someone who lives around here. Maybe I can track her down and get her help. She's met Draco, too. I just have to get past the little problem that she's probably heard that I've killed my mother and escaped from prison.

Riddle wrote back:

I think you will be able to get her to trust you. You are very resourceful.

Harry frowned. It was so strange to be getting encouragement from Tom Riddle; but then, Riddle thought they were all on the same side. Harry wrote that he would try and closed the diary. He turned to look at Draco, lying on the bunk with beads of sweat on his face, his eyes glazed over. He had to do something; he couldn't let Draco continue to stew. Having a

fever this long was dangerous. He didn't tell Riddle that he thought it was *his* fault, that he'd drawn too much strength from Draco. Instead, he hid the diary inside the pillowcase for the top bunk, left the carafe of tea near Draco's side, and set off to find Ruth Pelta.

* * * *

Harry stared up at the entrance to the synagogue. It was Moorish in design, with elaborate tile mosaics decorating the front facade. Harry heard music inside, and he cautiously opened the doors. It was twilight, and the lights were lit inside the anteroom in which he found himself now, glowing with golden light. A middle-aged man with reddish-brown hair and a yarmulke handed him a photocopied paper and said something that included the word, *Shabbat*, whatever that meant. Harry mumbled back at him and took the paper, but the man stopped him. "You'll need this, too," he said, handing him a small ivory-colored silken slip of fabric. It was a yarmulke.

"Oh, right," Harry said quickly. "I--I left mine at home." He smiled uncertainly at the man, who looked at him through narrow, suspicious eyes now. Harry perched the yarmulke awkwardly on top of his hair and slipped into the sanctuary, sitting in the back row. Looking at the paper in his hand, he saw that it had a date on it: Friday, 18 April, 1997. *Friday night.* Oh, Harry realized. They're having a Friday night service. He looked at the paper again. There were a variety of things going on, but then he noticed that one of them was called *Kaddish* and next to it was the name of the person he was seeking, *Ruth Pelta*. The name *Ravel* was also nearby.

Harry tried to mumble along with the people around him, but even when he tried to dutifully read the transliterated words from the paper he'd been given, he couldn't speak fast enough; looking around, he realized that most people weren't actually consulting the guide to the service, but seemed to know the words to various responses by heart. Finally, a man with salt-and-pepper hair and a kind face went to the lectern where a woman had stood to read, and after he put on some half-moon spectacles for reading that reminded Harry of Dumbledore, he started giving his sermon. Harry looked at the paper in his hand again; the name of the rabbi who was sermonizing was also Pelta, Jonathan Pelta. *Probably Ruth's father*, he thought.

"Next week, we will celebrate our Seders," the rabbi intoned. "We will set the extra place at our table. We will leave the door open. But do we ever *really* expect the unexpected visitor? Would we really welcome him if he were to come?"

Harry's mind wasn't on what the rabbi was saying, however; Harry moved his eyes around the space, searching for Ruth. He finally found her, near the front, looking nervous.

At last, when the sermon was done, Ruth stood near the front of the sanctuary. She took a deep breath, and then began to sing.

Harry had never known anyone could sing like that. He had loved his mother's singing, and his sister's, but this--

He sat mesmerized while her voice wove a spell around him, the notes tumbling over each other, the meaning of the unfamiliar words unimportant. When she was done, he opened his eyes again. The sound of her voice echoed in the still space; Harry had never seen people so completely hypnotized by singing, but he wasn't really surprised; she'd been amazing.

Harry barely paid any attention to the rest of the service (he felt more than a little disoriented), and afterward, he felt himself being propelled by the crowd into a hall at the far end of the sanctuary. Loaves of shiny, braided bread studded with raisins were raised and broken, and wine was poured. A blessing was said and "Omayn" was intoned in unison when it was done. What had seemed at first to be a continuation of the service turned into a swirl of socializing, as members of the congregation greeted each other with hugs and exclamations and grins, again saying something that sounded now like, "*Shabbat shalom!*" which he realized was what the man greeting him at the door had said. He found that someone thrust a small plastic plate with bread on it into one of his hands, and a paper cup of wine into the other. He tasted the bread; it was wonderfully springy and fresh, and the golden raisins in it were deliciously sweet. He drank some of the wine, which tasted odd to him, but it wasn't bad. It was so strange to eat and drink anything that didn't come out of the paper sack or the carafe of tea. He put his plate and cup down on a table and scanned the room for Ruth, finding her standing by herself in a corner, looking around wistfully. He made his way over to her and smiled.

"Your singing was amazing. What was that?"

Instead of being grateful for his compliment, she looked at him as though he were the stupidest person on the planet. "What was it? Are you daft? It was Ravel's setting for the *Kaddish*." She pointed at the folded paper in his hand. "Can't you read?"

"Oh, um, sorry. And, um--what is the *Kaddish*, exactly?"

Now he really felt like a prat. Her expression was even worse. "You're serious? What's the *Kaddish*?" Her voice had gone up.

"Ssshh!" Harry said, not wishing to draw attention to them. "I'm sorry. I'm--I'm not actually Jewish."

Now she smirked and took another sip of wine. "No! You don't say. I thought you were the president of Israel." The sarcasm in her voice was not lost on him.

"I don't suppose," he said, trying to change the subject, "that you recall hearing recently about someone named Harry Potter?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Actually, I have! A few weeks ago he broke out of prison. He killed his mother! I couldn't believe it. I've met him too. At a concert a few months ago down in London...Long story. But it's so odd to hear something like that about someone you've met...."

Harry leaned in and said softly, "He didn't do it."

Ruth jerked her head up. He realized suddenly that she didn't have brown eyes, as he'd thought, but hazel eyes that seemed to change randomly moment to moment, now green with brown around the outside and gold flecks, now brown with green flecks and a golden sheen behind them....

And now she was the one looking at him carefully. "I--I feel like we've met..."

He nodded. Then, swallowing, knowing he was taking a chance, he whispered to her, "It's me. Harry. I need your help."

Her eyes widened as she looked at him; he felt a little uncomfortable having her look into his eyes so intently, but he didn't flinch or look away while she did this. "You're--"

--on the run from the dark wizards who framed me," he said in a furtive whisper, having already decided that this was the best explanation to give her. "They've infiltrated the Ministry of Magic, which has a relationship of sorts with your Prime Minister, so when I escaped, they also told the Muggle authorities to look for me. I'm in disguise."

She smirked again. "I'll say. All we need to do is put some little curls in front of your ears and give you a prayer shawl and people around here will think you got lost while looking for the Orthodox temple....you look a little out of place in a Reform congregation. Plus--"

"What?"

"Well, I hate to say it, but--" She wrinkled her nose. "You smell a bit *ripe*," she whispered.

"Oh. Sorry. I've been--traveling. I should have thought of that. And the hair and beard--I just did it to look as little like myself as possible. Listen, I'm sorry I got your hopes up about Hogwarts and now it isn't going to happen...."

She shrugged. "That's okay. It's all rather like I dreamed it now. I'll just go on as I have done, study for my GCSEs, and go to college next year like everyone else, eventually take my A-Levels...."

"Still, I am sorry. And I'm not asking for help for me, actually; I'm not traveling alone. My friend is very ill. He's had a fever for about a week. I was sick before him, but not as bad. I'm really worried...."

She furrowed her brow. "Where is he?"

"In a tent in a park. In Rusholme."

"Where is it?"

"I'm not sure; I can find my way back, but--"

"Is it on Dickenson?" He nodded. "Must be Birchfields Park. I'm surprised you've been allowed to camp out there for a week."

He shrugged and said softly, "There are Muggle-repelling charms on the tent. Even if it's noticed, people wind up being convinced that they have more important things to do and they go off and leave it alone...."

She raised her eyebrows. "That's very convenient, isn't it?"

Harry sighed. "You have *no* idea."

Suddenly, Ruth started worming her way toward the door of the hall; she looked over her shoulder at Harry. "Well, come on then!"

Harry started saying, "Excuse me," to the people he was bumping into on his way out, wondering what Ruth had in mind. He followed her out to the synagogue's car park and she went to the driver's side of what looked like a ten-year-old Ford, unlocking the driver's side in a businesslike fashion and climbing in. Harry saw her reach over with her left hand and unlock the passenger door. He opened it and climbed in, somewhat uncertainly.

"Um," he said once he'd closed the door. "Do you know what you're doing?" She turned and gave him that what-planet-are-you-from look again.

"I think I do. It's only my car."

"Oh," he answered meekly, realizing that most Muggles who were around her age would start driving as soon as it was possible, as opposed to wizards, who mostly did not unless they lived in areas where there were few wizards and they wanted to blend in with the Muggles.

"How old are you?"

She looked at him with one eyebrow raised. "Sixteen. How old are you?"

"Sixteen. When's your birthday?"

"March fourth. When's yours?"

"July thirty-first."

"Well," she said, as though that settled some disagreement. "That's it then. We should go."

Ruth started the car and Harry admired the efficient way she backed it out of the spot in which it was parked. "I'll tell Bubbe I'm going to sit with a sick friend," she said, and Harry waited in the car while she drove to her house, which was only a few blocks from the synagogue. He leaned back and closed his eyes while he waited, and she returned quickly, getting back in the car and resuming driving without comment. At last, she turned left onto the main road he'd taken up from Rusholme. After a few more turns, he noticed that they were on Dickenson, and then he recognized the park where he and Draco had been staying. Ruth parked the car and followed Harry to the trees where the tent was partially hidden. She puzzled over its small size, then gasped when she stood up beside Harry, looking around the interior with the most amazed expression. Then she saw Draco and went to the bunk, a worried look taking over her face. She put her hand on his brow, then looked in his eyes and listened to his breathing.

"Actually," she said, sitting back on her haunches, "he seems to be coming out of the worst of it. But he'll still have a long road to recovery. I know just the thing for him right now."

"What?" Harry wanted to know.

"Chicken soup."

"Chicken soup? Isn't that a bit of a cliché?"

"On the contrary; it's now been shown quite scientifically to be as beneficial as all Jewish mothers always knew it was." She grinned at him, and he grinned back. He liked her and felt like they could be friends. Then he realized of whom she reminded him: Hermione. He suddenly missed Hermione a great deal. The Hermione who was his friend, to whom he could tell anything. He almost thought that he could tell her about Ginny....Well, maybe not *that* kind of everything....

Ruth pushed her shining dark hair behind one ear and looked down gently at Draco. "I think I met him. At the concert. What's his name again?"

"Draco Malfoy."

She sighed and brushed her hand lightly over the cropped hair; over the course of about two weeks it was only about a quarter-inch longer than when Dumbledore had chopped it off. "What did he do to his hair? He had nice hair...." she said musingly. Harry bristled for a moment at Draco receiving compliments from her when he was in a fevered stupor, whereas she'd been laughing at him and as much as told him he looked like a Hasidic stereotype.

"It's a disguise," he said shortly. She looked up at the tone in his voice.

"You had nice hair, too," she said, as though she could read minds. "You've just got a lot more of it now," she added, smirking. Then he had to smile too, and it was strange; in that moment he realized who it was that she *really* reminded him of: Jamie. He ached inside for a moment, remembering his sister, and then remembering how Ginny had died almost at the same time, remembered holding her that last time....

Ruth looked at him now with concern. "Are you all right?" He jerked his head up. The trouble was, she was neither Jamie nor Hermione; she wasn't anyone he dared put his head on and cry out all of the grief and pain he'd been keeping bottled up inside, especially the most bottled-up pain and grief he carried....

Mum...Mum....

"Can--can you get me some chicken soup to give him?" he asked her instead, trying to get back to the matter at hand.

"Of course. We always have some at home in the fridge. My Bubbe makes the best chicken sou--"

"Er, bubby?" He remembered that she said that before. "That sounds like a house-elf."

"What's a house-elf? Bubbe is my grandmother. Well, technically, my great-grandmother. She's my mother's grandmother. I don't actually have grandparents; my mother's parents died in Dachau while Bubbe smuggled my mum out of Poland, a tiny baby. And my dad's parents were killed by Mussolini."

"Oh, erm, sorry?" he said uncertainly. She stood brusquely, smoothing down her skirt.

"I wasn't fishing for sympathy. These are just facts of life for me. I'll go home and get some of that soup. You're lucky I'm not Orthodox, or I wouldn't even be driving the car on Shabbas."

"I just feel lucky in general," he grinned at her.

She looked around. "It's so dark in here." The tent was only dimly lit by the moonlight filtered through the tent walls. "Don't you have a torch or anything like that?"

"Unfortunately, no. We can use our wands for torches, but that would call attention to us from the local Ministry of Magic office, so we don't dare."

"Well, I can bring you a torch too. Or some candles if you like. And--"

"What?"

"Well, you might want to come with me. You can, um--use the bath at my house."

Harry backed away from her, afraid his odor was offending her. "Oh, right."

"And while we're at it--maybe we can launder some things for you. Is he wearing anything under those covers?"

"Just his drawers."

"Then gather up his other clothes so he'll have fresh things to wear when he recovers. Didn't you two stop at any launderettes?"

"No; we just concentrated on forward movement."

"Well, gather up the things we need to wash; he looks like he's resting peacefully for now. A little longer won't make a difference. And tomorrow or the next day, he can come over and use the bath, if he's feeling a little better."

When they reached Ruth's house, she touched her fingers to her lips and then to a small amulet on the door frame before they entered. They managed to avoid her great-grandmother, who had gone to bed; her parents were also in bed. They'd left Ruth a note, asking how her sick friend was, and reminding her to put out the cat. Ruth wrestled a large grey tom out the door and showed Harry where the downstairs bath was. She waited until after he'd filled the tub and he handed his clothes to her while he held a towel around his waist. She took the clothes, looking at him briefly and then disappearing, her face very pink again.

Harry had forgotten the luxury of baths, of sinking down into clean, warm water. The water wasn't clean for very long, however. He was appalled, and grateful for the chance to clean up. He also shortened his hair and beard back to the way they always used to be. He could do without the disguise while he was waiting for his clean clothes. His head felt light and free.

When he emerged from the bath, another towel around his waist, Ruth was in the kitchen, taking the damp clothes out of the clothes washer. She looked startled at his less hirsute appearance, but didn't comment on it. Then it suddenly occurred to Harry to wonder how they were going to get the clothes dry, but evidently Ruth had already thought of that. She turned to the cooker and began inserting them into the oven.

"What are you doing?" he cried, almost dropping the towel.

"Well, we haven't time to hang them on the line, have we? This won't take long actually. We just need to keep checking, to make sure they don't catch on fire."

"*Don't catch on fire?*" he said with a squeak in his voice. She looked at him, laughing.

"I have American cousins who think we're dreadfully backward because we don't have an electric clothes dryer, but I told them that I only know a few people who do, that almost *no one* in England or the rest of Europe does. They think we're savages. Actually, mum wants to get one, but we had to get the roof fixed, so dad says we have to wait." She smiled. Then her eyes traveled onto his bare chest again, and he looked down, suddenly extremely aware that all he had on was a towel. She turned away from him and peered through the round window in the oven door.

"Not yet," she murmured, her face very pink again. Harry sat on the opposite side of the kitchen table from where she was. She didn't look at him again while they were waiting for the clothes.

At length, she removed his and Draco's clothes from the oven, still very slightly damp, but beginning to smoke a little, too. "Here are your things," she said, bringing her eyes up to Harry's again, then down; her gaze landed on his left arm, and she noticed the Dark Mark. "Oh....They mentioned that in the reports...."

He picked up the clothes and hugged them to him so it was no longer visible. The clothes were warm, with a slightly singed smell. "I'd best go back to the bathroom to--"

"Yes. Right. Of course." She swallowed, and he felt her eyes on him as he left.

When he emerged from the bath, he had the long hair and beard again; they were going to be venturing outside to go back to the tent, and he couldn't risk anyone seeing that he looked just like Harry Potter, the escaped murderer. He carried Draco's clean clothes to the car, and she had a glass jar of her great-grandmother's chicken soup, as well as a torch and some candles and matches.

When they were back in the tent, Harry lit one of the candles and dripped some wax onto a plate to anchor it while she used the small stove which came with the tent to heat the soup; Harry and Draco hadn't used it at all because of the food supply in the sack. "Strangest tent I ever saw," she commented with a grin. "A stove, pots and pans, dishes..."

Harry smiled at her. "Welcome to the wizarding world."

When it was ready, they helped Draco to sit up and spooned some of the soup into his mouth. He was still a little delirious.

"*Jamie*," he smiled at Ruth, his eyes unfocused. "I knew I could count on you...."

She didn't correct him but gave him a gentle smile in return. "Sshh. Don't talk. Be a good lad and eat your soup," she said softly, like a mother taking care of a small child. Harry watched her in the flickering candlelight, fascinated. He hadn't really had the chance to get to know Ruth very well in his other life, but he thought now that he might just like that to change when he managed to fix things....

He slumped over the table, suddenly quite exhausted, and put his head on his arms. Soon he heard a voice, singing something soft and low in a language he didn't recognize. He lifted his head and watched her while she sang; Draco seemed to be oblivious. When she was done, he asked, "What was that?"

She looked startled, as though she'd forgotten he was there. "Oh, just something my Bubbe used to sing to me. I think it's Yiddish...."

He thought of his mother and his sister singing *Suogan*. "In our family, it was a Welsh lullaby. Mum sang it...."

She looked up, eager. "Do you remember it?"

He frowned. "Maybe...." He remembered his mother sitting vigil by Stuart's bedside, and suddenly, he found the words in his mouth, as though they'd bypassed his brain altogether, and his throat was channeling the memory of his mother....

*Huna blentyn yn fy mynwes
Clyd a chynnes ydyw hon
Breichiau mam sy'n dyn am danat,
Cariad mam sy dan fy mron
Ni cha dim amharu'th gyntun
Ni wna undyn â thi gam
Huna'n dawel, anwyl blentyn
Huna'n fwyn ar fron dy fam.*

*Huna'n dawel, heno, huna,
Huna'n fwyn, y tlws ei lun
Pam yr wyt yn awr yn gwenu,
Gwenu'n dirion yn dy hun?
Ai angylion fry sy'n gwenu
Arnat ti yn gwenu'n llon
Tithau'n gwenu'n ol dan huno
Huno'n dawel ar fy mron?*

He wasn't aware that his face was wet until he was done singing. She crouched by his chair, concern etched on her face. "How could anyone think you'd killed your mother?" she asked softly. He looked down at her, and he noticed in the candlelight that she had freckles across her nose, as Jamie had....

"That's the thing," he said in a strangled voice. "I did."

Suddenly she stood and backed away from him, a horrified look on her face. "But you said--"

"I know. But--it was an accident. It was still my fault." He looked down at his hands. "I can never forget that--"

She returned to where she'd been and looked up at him. "Of course you can't," she said softly. He looked back at her and time seemed to stop. He wasn't sure how long they'd sat there in silence when she suddenly stood, very businesslike again, and said, "Well, you've got some soup now. I'll bring more tomorrow. I'll tell Bubbe I took some of her soup to a sick friend and it did them a world of good. She likes to know these things. It confirms for her that there's order in the universe."

"Was she at the service?"

"No; she goes Saturday morning. Bubbe likes doing Friday night in the old way, at home; the mother is supposed to light the Sabbath candles, did you know that? Not the father. Then she says the prayer, *Praise be to you, Adonai, king of the universe, who has sanctified with your commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights.* Well, that's a rough translation, anyway."

"What's *Adonai*?"

"Oh. Sorry I didn't translate that. *Adonai* means 'Lord.'"

"Oooh," he said, understanding now. "That's what I was hearing over and over during the service...."

"Right. We say 'Adonai' because you have to be very careful of using the name of God; otherwise you risk it being in vain. Some Orthodox Jews

even write 'G-dash-D' instead of writing 'G-O-D' because they don't want to risk taking the name in vain." Harry frowned.

"So you don't say 'Jehovah,' or 'Yahweh?'"

"Oh, no. Throwing around terms like that....No. It's usually 'Adonai' all over the place. I don't even think about it any more. It's just *done*."

Lord. And avoiding saying the name. Like Voldemort. Had Voldemort himself tried to encourage that? Calling him the Dark Lord and giving people the idea that they shouldn't say his name? He really *did* want to be a god, Harry thought. Trying to be immortal, wanting people to be afraid to say his name....Harry felt an anger rising up in him, but he tried to push it down; Ruth wouldn't understand about Voldemort.

"So does she say it in English?" he asked her, trying to come back to what they were discussing.

"She doesn't speak English. It's in Hebrew. And it's more *sung* than *said*...."

"You mean like when you sang the *Kaddish*?"

"Yes."

"You never did tell me what that is."

She paused for a moment. "It's--it's the prayer for the dead," she said softly. "We say it so often--it's almost second nature to most Jews...."

He nodded. "I noticed that. Like--like--I don't even know what the equivalent would be for non-Jews--"

"The word is 'gentiles.' It's like the Christian *Lord's Prayer*, perhaps. As far as familiarity goes."

"That might be about right." For some reason they were just looking at each other again, and this time when she looked away, she seemed to be a little pinker than before. He suddenly said, "Teach me."

"What?" she turned back to him.

"Teach me the *Kaddish*. I--I have a lot of people--" he paused, tears choking his throat again, even though his eyes were dry "--a lot of people to mourn--"

She nodded. "If you like. Fine. He won't be going anywhere soon." She motioned to Draco with her head. "I'll be back tomorrow. I can start

teaching you then. And I can bring more chicken soup." She moved to leave the tent. "Good night," she said softly.

"*Shabbat shalom*," he said, smiling. She smiled too now.

"*Shabbat shalom*, Harry Potter."

* * * *

"Try that again," Ruth said patiently. Harry repeated the phrase she had sung, but she stopped him after two words to correct his pronunciation, and he tried again. This time she let him finish, and smiled warmly at him.

"What the hell are you doing, Harry?" a voice said from the direction of the bottom bunk. Harry turned to his best friend.

"Draco! You're all right!"

Draco struggled to sit up, his skin pasty-looking, his grey eyes bloodshot. "I would be if you weren't doing *that*."

Ruth bristled. "Harry has a very nice voice, and he's doing very well."

Draco rubbed his eyes and looked around Harry. "Who're you?"

Harry moved his chair. "Draco, you remember Ruth Pelta, don't you? From the concert. She would have been starting at Hogwarts if the ban hadn't been reinstated."

Draco looked at her with narrowed eyes, the nodded as it came back to him. "Right, right. I've been, erm, a bit out of it." Harry remembered how he'd been calling her *Jamie* in his delirium.

"Yeah, we know. Listen, now that you're feeling better, we've got some good news. Ruth got us some train tickets. We can go as far as Leicester."

"I didn't have that much money. You'll have to change trains twice," Ruth said apologetically. "Once in Stafford and once in Nuneaton." She looked down at the timetable she'd brought. "In Stafford you have only to wait seven minutes for the next train. In Nuneaton the wait is thirty-seven minutes. But it's still the fastest trip. Only about two-and-a-half hours from start to finish. You could have had trips with just one switch, either in Loughborough or in Nottingham, but going through Loughborough takes almost three hours, and going through Nottingham takes almost three-and-a-half, so the extra train switch seemed like the best way to go. Especially since you'd have to wait about an hour in Nottingham to get the train to Leicester."

"And after that we can go down to Sywell to see Alicia," Harry added.

Draco frowned now. "I thought Dumbledore didn't want us looking up the Muggle-borns. He thought it was too dangerous."

Harry shook his head. "We really needed Ruth. We were lucky we got sick near where she lives. And do you know how long it would take us to walk to Leicester? This'll really save us time and energy. I don't think either one of us is up for walking six hours a day again yet."

Draco rubbed his hand over his face. "When do we have to go?"

"Not until Monday night. You should be right as rain by then," Ruth told him. He frowned.

"That would be helpful if I knew what today was," he said petulantly. Harry hoped he wasn't going to start whining again.

"It's Sunday. You can come to my house today, if you like. There's no one there but my great-grandmother. Mum and dad are teaching at the yeshiva. You can have a bath."

Now Draco looked like he wanted to kiss her. "A *bath*," he said with feeling. "That would be abso-bloody-lutely *brilliant*." Harry laughed. Draco must be delirious still, to be talking like that, he thought. He was reminded of Ron.

"Do you want to go now?" she asked him.

"*Please.*"

They packed up the tent and helped Draco walk to the car, which they'd forgotten to mention to him. Harry thought Draco was going to weep for joy when he saw it. When they pulled up to Ruth's house, her great-grandmother was leaving. Harry slumped down in his seat in the car, so he wouldn't be seen. The old woman wore a kerchief tied over her hair and spoke to Ruth rapidly in what Harry assumed was Polish. When she was gone, Ruth motioned to them and they got out of the car. She touched her fingers to her lips and to the amulet on the doorway again before they entered. When they were inside, Harry said to her, "So, you speak Polish?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. That was Yiddish."

He sighed. He couldn't imagine being able to speak one other language, yet alone two or three. Latin for spells didn't count, he felt. He'd always struggled in Latin when he was going to the village school.

Draco just wanted to get into the bath. Harry showed him where it was, and soon he heard the water running and steam started seeping out from under the door. Harry joined Ruth in the kitchen, where she was making

sandwiches. He watched her move around, taking mustard and meat out of the fridge, cutting the bread, pushing her hair behind her ear when it fell in her face. She looked up suddenly and met his gaze, not looking away for a good minute, then just as suddenly, focusing on what she was doing again. Her face was a little pinker now.

When the sandwiches were done, she put some sliced pickles on the plates and placed them on the table. She drummed her fingers, waiting, and Harry looked around the small, neat room; he missed the simple utilitarian nature of the typical Muggle kitchen. There was something very comforting about it, somehow, and he pictured Ruth's great-grandmother bustling around the small room, making soup and encouraging Ruth to eat, eat....

They decided against waiting for Draco; clearly he was going to take quite a while. When they were done their silent meal, Draco finally emerged from the bath. He looked pink and clean, his eyes very bright in his face. His facial hair was actually starting to be visible; he appeared to have a small, pale goatee. When he saw the plate waiting for him, he dove at it, barely stopping to chew. Harry grimaced, somewhat embarrassed by his friend's lack of manners. Normally Draco was the one upbraiding *him* for manners, but after his illness, it was as though he needed to re-evolve a bit to get back to where he was before becoming ill.

There was a small ancient black-and-white television on the counter, and, fascinated, Draco started fiddling with the buttons and dials until a picture of a grinning woman pointing to bottled dishwashing soap appeared on the screen, talking very loudly.

"Damn, Draco! Turn that down!" Harry complained. Draco fiddled with a dial, and the woman's sales pitch doubled in volume.

"Down! Down! Not *up*," he yelled, his hands over his ears. Draco hastily turned the knob in the other direction.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Ruth rose and gathered up the plates, taking them to the sink and preparing to wash them. Harry went to help her, remembering washing dishes with Hermione at four, Privet Drive. Draco continued to stare at the television, which was showing an old American cowboy film. Harry recognized John Wayne, and he hoped sincerely that Draco wouldn't start modeling himself on him. Ruth made no comment about Harry helping her with the dishes, but accepted his help as though there were nothing remarkable about this. When they were done, they left the room, Draco still utterly absorbed by the film.

"Do you want to learn more of the *Kaddish*?" she asked Harry when they were in the living room. She sat down at the piano that was shoved

between groaning bookcases, and Harry joined her. He noticed that there was no television in this room.

"Can I--can I get rid of this again? For a little while? If no one will be coming in." He indicated his hair and beard. She nodded, and, after concentrating very hard, he had short hair and no beard or mustache again.

"Wow," she breathed. "That was like--like watching film backwards. So strange....Can all wizards do that?"

"No, not all." He ran his hand over his face. "It's a relief to be rid of that. I think when I actually have a choice about it, I'm never going to have facial hair again." She smiled at him, starting to reach her hand out to touch his cheek, then pulling it back guiltily.

"You have a nice face," she said softly. "People should be allowed to see it." He looked at her in surprise, but then she turned to the piano, opening up a piece of sheet music. She behaved as though she had said nothing unusual. Harry looked at her profile and did not respond.

They spent the afternoon at the piano together, and now he felt like he actually knew the *Kaddish*, although he wouldn't dream of saying he was as good at singing it as she was. He asked her to sing it again, and she did. He leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes, listening, thinking of his mother, his sister, his little brother...thinking of Ginny....

When she was done, she sat next to him on the couch, and he opened his eyes. Why was it so hard *not* to look at her? She wasn't especially remarkable looking. She was, in fact, very average when you took all of her features separately. Her ever-changing hazel eyes were the most remarkable thing about her. Unremarkable smooth brown hair, unremarkable nose with a scattering of freckles, a nice smile but a couple of crooked teeth....But somehow, the combination was something he found very hard to ignore.

He turned to her suddenly. "Why did you trust me right away? Friday night? I mean, you'd heard I'd killed my mother and escaped from prison, and you didn't start screaming and pointing at me."

She looked thoughtful. "Well, I suppose it's because you gave me such a gift. The gift of understanding myself, the things I can do. There was nothing in that for you; you just felt like it was the right thing to do. Somehow, I didn't think anyone who would do that would--do what you were being accused of."

"Thank you," he said sincerely.

"My turn to ask a question: You said you had a lot of people to mourn," she said softly. "Who?"

He looked down at his hands. "My mum. My sister Jamie. My brother Stu. And--and my girlfriend, Ginny. And in a way--"

"What?"

"Well," he hesitated, "for a little while, we thought she might be--um--pregnant. It turned out she wasn't. Still--"

"It feels like a loss," she said softly. He nodded. "You'd have liked her. If you'd gone to Hogwarts when you were supposed to, you would have been in the same year. Probably in the same house, and then you would have been roommates."

Ruth smiled. "Tell me about her."

Harry was startled. *Tell me about her.* Where to begin? But then, suddenly, he couldn't believe he didn't know where to begin; a flood of Ginny-information rushed out of him, and he found that he was telling her every absurd episode of his stalking her, and then sneaking around together....meeting at the Quidditch World Cup....explaining what Quidditch *was*....Ginny kissing him after she'd lost the bet....Ruth laughed frequently, and finally, he did too, although she was appalled when he told her of Ginny being pulled into the lake and then getting caught in the snow storm....

"Well, aren't you two cozy?" Harry jerked his head up and saw Draco standing in the doorway. He looked distinctly hostile.

"I--I was telling Ruth about Ginny," he said feebly, standing suddenly, realizing that he and Ruth were sitting very close together.

"We should go back to the park," Draco said brusquely. "When's the last time one of us wrote in the you-know-what?" Draco looked suspiciously at Ruth, as though he wondered whether Harry had told her about the diary.

"Good point," Harry said, hoping that by being agreeable he would get Draco to take that nasty expression off his face. "We should go. We can rest some more tomorrow during the day before getting the train."

Draco grunted in reply, then turned back to the kitchen. Ruth looked at Harry with a puzzled expression. He shrugged. They were all very silent on the way back to the park. Ruth said goodbye quietly and walked back to her car while they worked at setting up the tent again.

When it was ready, they entered and Harry turned on the electric torch Ruth had given them, sitting down at the table with Draco to supervise his diary entry.

"What do we tell him?" Draco asked abruptly.

"The truth. In fact, he's the one who suggested I get some help." Draco was surprised at this, but he opened the book and began to write what Harry recited to him. After just a few minutes, Harry stopped him. "That's enough. You've just gotten your strength back, and not completely. From now on, we're going to take turns writing, so you don't get so weak and vulnerable to illness again."

Draco bristled. "I seem to recall *you* getting sick first."

"Yes, but you were sick more than twice as long."

"But--"

"Draco!" Harry interrupted him. "It's not a competition. And it's not up for discussion. I'm going to write in it, too."

"Oh, it's *not up for discussion*. Who died and made you king?"

Harry stood up and pulled out his wand, feeling his entire body vibrating with rage. "Who died? Who *died*? How about almost my *entire family*? Is that enough for you? And Ginny, too. And being stuck in this sodding life with *you* for a best friend."

Now Draco stood and took out his own wand. "Your sister was also *my* girlfriend. You're not the only one who's lost someone. And you seem to be getting over Ginny just fine. I couldn't help notice that you and that Ruth were--"

"Don't go there, Draco," Harry warned, his voice very dangerous. "And there's still the little matter of Jamie. You said some things while you were sick that made me think it was possible you had slept with my sister. So did you? Did you sleep with Jamie?"

Draco looked at him, his face very closed up. "That's my business. But go on; ask me again. Add some red hair and you'll be the spitting image of Weasley," he sneered.

Harry extended his wand arm. "Dammit, Malfoy, did you or didn't you?"

"Oh, is *that* how it is, *Potter*? And get your bloody wand out of my face!" Draco snapped back.

"Answer me!" Harry was shaking; he couldn't hold his wand still.

"You want an answer? Here's your answer. *Expelliarmus!*"

Harry's wand went flying into Draco's hand and Harry felt pushed backward, crashing into the bunks, hitting his head painfully on the upper bunk. He was merely momentarily stunned, however, and immediately launched himself forward, slamming Draco to the floor and prying both wands from his hands, throwing them under the table. He quickly pinned the thinner boy's shoulders to the floor and looked down at him, anger still boiling in him. Draco reached up and hit him in the jaw, making Harry bite his tongue; he tasted blood. Quickly, before he could hit him again, Harry grabbed both wrists and held them tightly.

"Stop it! Stop it!"

Harry looked down at Draco, who was suddenly deflated. Harry let go of his wrists and stood slowly, picking up his wand and then handing Draco's to him. They both put their wands in their pockets, breathing heavily and glaring at each other. It was merely a detente; the war was not over.

"We have to get out of here now, you realize, you prat," Harry said, still glaring. "Now that you've been stupid enough to do magic."

Draco nodded and they moved quickly now, picking up the sack, carafe, diary, Invisibility Cloak and now the candles and torch before leaving the tent and starting to dismantle it. They threw the cloak over themselves and began to walk out of the park, just as someone suddenly appeared before them. It was an Auror, Harry was sure, based on his wizarding robes and extended wand, but it was no one he recognized. Must be someone who works out of the local office. He wondered how long the Longbottoms stayed in Inverness before they realized he wasn't anywhere near that part of Scotland.

They stood very still under the cloak, watching the Auror walk past them on the gravel path; they had avoided walking on this path to avoid leaving footprints and making a great deal of noise from the gravel crunching under their feet. The Auror continued to walk toward the trees where they had been camping, and they slowly began to move toward the street. Harry could not believe how quickly the Auror had come; if they had taken one moment longer to put the cloak on, they either would have been discovered or they would have needed to get into an all out fight with an unfamiliar Auror, whose abilities were an unknown. Although he had been feeling a little cocky about fooling the Longbottoms into getting on the wrong train, he wasn't sure how he'd do going up against an Auror in a dueling situation, and even though having Draco with him meant that it would be two-against-one, in his current state of mind, Harry wasn't entirely certain Draco wouldn't turn on him and take the Auror's side.

They didn't talk, walking through the quiet streets. Harry would put his elbow in Draco's side to indicate whether they should turn right or left;

he'd been keeping careful track of the way that Ruth had driven to and from her house, and after almost an hour, they finally reached it. Harry carefully opened the garden gate, which squeaked, making him wince. They closed it again and crept into the garden, then took off the cloak when they were standing in the shelter of the potting shed, so that it was between them and the windows at the rear of the house. They needed some other place to set up the tent, and Harry had noticed a high privet around the Pelta garden, which would shield them from the neighbors. Still silent, except for Draco's occasional soft swearing, they set up the tent again, finally climbing into their bunks in the darkness.

What have you done to him, Riddle? Harry wondered. But he didn't dare ask his friend about this. And he didn't dare ask about Jamie again, not yet. They still had a long way to go. Hopefully neither one of them would kill the other before they reached their final destination.

Chapter Sixteen

The Nomads

Harry woke up to a combination of sounds he hadn't heard since he lived with the Dursleys in his other life: chirping birds, the *thunk* of a newspaper landing on the front step next door to the Peltas, and the peaceful, tranquil sound of--

An hysterically screaming Draco. Wait, he thought; that was never part of living on Privet Drive....

"Aaaah! Aaaah! Get it out of here, Harry! Get it out!"

Harry opened his eyes groggily and looked around. What was he going on about? Harry jumped down from the top bunk and stooped over to look at his friend, and when he did, he could see Draco lying back in the bottom bunk, his blanket pulled up above his nose so that his eyes were peering over it. There was a large grey cat sitting on his chest, calmly washing himself, oblivious to the terrified screaming. Harry tried not to laugh, he really did, but he just couldn't stop it bubbling up from inside him now, and soon he was bent double, holding his stomach, positive that if he looked in a mirror, his face would be bright red.

Draco looked at him; Harry could only see his eyes, but they were very angry eyes. Oh, well, Harry thought. I guess that's something that's still the same. Draco didn't like Mrs. Figg's cats, either. He thought the cat looked like the grey tom that Ruth had put out, and he picked it up, bracing himself to feel its claws dig into him, since he was a stranger to the animal. Instead, the cat started rubbing the side of his face against Harry's hand and purring loudly, then licked his fingers a little with his sandpapery tongue. Harry smiled. Cats generally liked him, he'd discovered. Crookshanks used to love curling up on Harry to sleep, and

both Ron's little kitten Argent and Ginny's cat MacKenzie liked him and would spontaneously come to him for petting and a lap.

Harry reached for the Invisibility Cloak and threw it on, still holding the cat, who was purring very loudly now. "It's Ruth's cat. I'll just take him to the kitchen door; maybe someone will hear him and give him his breakfast."

Draco just waved his hand at his invisible friend, anxious for the detested creature to leave the tent. Harry stepped onto the wet grass in his bare feet, shivering in the morning cool, glad of the warm, furry animal in his arms. When he reached the Pelta's kitchen door, he put the cat down and stepped back; the animal sat on the mat, washing patiently, confident that his people would take care of him. Sure enough, less than a minute later, the door opened, and Ruth emerged, wearing her school clothes. Harry smiled; she looked very young suddenly in her knee socks and dark pleated skirt, her crisp shirt with its necktie and deep burgundy vest, her dark blazer with its school crest on the pocket.

"There you are, Spazz! Get in here; Bubbe has some nice tuna for you...."

The cat trotted into the house with its tail erect, dignified, knowing he would receive his due. Ruth carried a rucksack which groaned with books, and a pair of running shoes tied together by the laces was looped over one of the straps. Harry heard a voice stopping her, speaking in a language she didn't understand. Ruth answered in the same language, returning to the recesses of the kitchen again briefly, then emerging with a paper sack in her hand. Harry stepped to the side so she wouldn't barrel right into him, and discovered that another girl about Ruth's age had opened the garden gate and was walking toward the kitchen door, dressed in the same uniform as Ruth. Her severe black-framed glasses were very squarish, her short blond spiky hair had deliberate black streaks in it, and she held a cigarette lighter in her hands.

"Hey, Ruthie! All set?"

"Am I!"

Ruth grabbed her friend by the coattails and pulled her behind the house. Harry was afraid they would both see the tent, but they stayed on the side of the shed away from it.

"Just give it to me," Ruth said breathlessly, a desperate look on her face. Her friend took a pack of cigarettes out of her blazer pocket and Ruth quickly removed one from the pack and fumbled with the lighter, finally igniting the end of the paper-wrapped tube, then inhaling the smoke and exhaling it again in a silver cloud, an expression of relief on her face. She took another drag and handed it to her friend, leaning back against the shed and exhaling more smoke, her eyes closed. The smoke made Harry's

nose tickle and he pressed his finger against the skin above his upper lip, trying not to sneeze.

"Oh, Dee, I have been *dying* for a fag all weekend," she breathed with relief.

Her friend smiled, exhaling smoke through her nose and flicking some ash on the ground. "Really? I thought you were too busy to meet me this weekend. You could have--"

Ruth straightened up suddenly. "Right. Well I--I had to go see a sick friend. He needed some chicken soup and--and company. Give me that," she said, yanking the cigarette out of her friend's hand again and dragging on it. Her friend smirked now.

"He needed chicken soup, did he? Who's this, then? Why haven't I heard about him?"

Ruth colored and drew more smoke from the quickly dwindling cigarette. "Just someone I met during the hols, down in London," she said with forced casualness.

"Uh huh," Dee said, taking the last drag from the cigarette, then crushing it out with her large black oxford shoe. "That's why you look like--"

"Listen," Ruth protested. "He was sick and needed help. And--and his girlfriend just died. And his brother and sister and mother. I mean--it's just awful. Okay? I'm not pursuing someone who's in mourning, especially for his girlfriend. I mean--he asked me to teach him the *Kaddish*, for goodness sake. That's been known to lead to countless romances, I know..." she stressed sarcastically.

"Yes, well, your last romance grew out of even less auspicious beginnings, if I recall..."

Ruth made a face. "You mean *Bruce*?" Ruth sighed. "My luck. A perfectly good boyfriend whose parents decide to move back to Australia, as though he'd be safer there. *I'll write to you every week*, he says. *I'll never forget you*, he says. How many letters do you think I've received from Australia in the last seven months? One. That was a month after. Since then--nothing. Give me another of those things--" she said, reaching for the cigarettes again.

"Whatever happened to that other school you were going to go to, anyway? The one up in Scotland?" Ruth froze when Dee said this. "What was it for again?"

"Erm--music. I was to be on full scholarship. But, er, one of the board members embezzled the money. Big scandal all around. I'd rather not talk about it." Dee patted her friend's back, commiserating.

"Well, we'd better go or we'll be late," Dee cautioned, but took out a cigarette and handed it to Ruth anyway. Ruth lit it and sighed. Dee motioned to the paper sack. "Last day of freedom, is it?"

Ruth looked down at the sack as though she'd just as soon fling it over the privet into the next garden. "Last day of the challah. Whitefish, I think. The bread's going stale; soon it'll be good for a doorstop and not much else. I couldn't convince mum to go to Klein's to buy any fresh yesterday morning because she said we'd just be getting rid of the extra today anyway." She flicked ash from the end of the cigarette. "Now it's a week of matzos."

Her friend clucked in sympathy. "Well, I thought I'd go ruddy mad during Lent. I had to resort to sneaking into McDonald's."

"You see? That's why you're always dieting and I'm not. Kosher food is naturally healthy." She took another drag on the cigarette. Yeah, Harry thought; *that's* really healthy.

"Yes, it's vile stuff, but it's at least *meat*. Mum's been on such a religion kick lately. Thinks she impressing Father Mike by telling him no one in our house had any meat until Easter Sunday. Gah!"

"Your mum still waiting to hear the voices?"

Dee rolled her eyes. "I am so tired of living with Joan of bloody Arc. Now that she's heard Princess Di is considering becoming a Catholic she's worse than ever. I swear, Ruthie, I'm this close to becoming C of E or just a sodding atheist. Or maybe I'll do like your brother. What is he now? A Sikh?"

Ruth snorted. "Buddhist. Mum and dad are trying to be philosophical about it. He's at uni, he's experimenting..."

"How did that start?"

"Oh, he was studying karate, looked up the history, discovered it began with Buddhist monks on Okinawa, and it mushroomed from there. But he and Sarah are still going to Seder at Hillel House on campus. Mum and dad would kill him if he didn't. Dad went to yeshiva with the rabbi who's the Jewish chaplain at Durham. He'd find out if Joel didn't go, even if Sarah lied for him--which she would."

"No one else in this bloody country is religious, why do our families have to be so barking mad? At least I have it easier than you though; Father

Mike isn't my dad. And frankly, if I don't go to mass, he's easier on me than Mum is. I confess to him that I lied to Mum about going to mass, he gives me a few Hail Marys...I'm lucky Mum doesn't check up on me and ask Father Mike if I've been. I think it's been over three months. Soon, of course, he may notice that I'm *always* confessing the same thing, and he might tell me he can't give me absolution because I'm clearly not remorseful...."

"What would you do then?"

Dee shrugged. "Who cares? I'm only at confession because Mum goes and drags me with her. She takes *ages* in there. She raised her voice once, after she'd been confessing for a while. I think he fell asleep!" she laughed, and Ruth joined in. "You'd think she needed that much time to confess to being involved in drug trafficking or something illegal. I wish she were; at least then my life might get *interesting*." At the word "illegal," Ruth began coughing and slapping her upper chest, no longer laughing. Harry grimaced. Ruth seemed to think Dee was too close to the mark.

She plucked the cigarette out of Ruth's mouth, as though that were the cause of Ruth's coughing fit, and took a last drag on it herself before crushing it underfoot. "We should go. We'll be late. The Dominatrix will have our arses if she catches us sneaking in again. And aren't your parents probably going to leave soon?"

Ruth had recovered; she seemed grateful that her friend was no longer discussing illegal activities. "Yeah; Mum's taking the rest of the *tref* food to the soup kitchen at St. Alban's. It's near her office at the Centre. That way she can feel very virtuous about throwing out food."

"I'd have taken it if my Mum would let me, but you know how she is..."

"How'd you convince her to let you come tonight?"

As they walked toward the garden gate, Harry heard Dee admit to Ruth, "Well...strictly speaking, she just thinks I'm going to be doing GCSE revision with you....If I had any nerve I'd tell her I'm converting to Judaism, just to see what color she'd turn...."

"Say *chutzpah*. It'll be more convincing...."

"At least it'll give me something different to say at confession next time...."

Their voices faded as they moved onto the pavement and down the street. Harry was going to go back to the tent when the kitchen door opened again and a woman Harry assumed was Ruth's mother emerged, carrying a cardboard box against her middle. Harry couldn't see what was in it. She

had short-cropped dark hair with a touch of grey around her face, small oval glasses with dark metal frames and an older version of Ruth's face. The deep smile lines around her mouth and eyes made her look like a very stern but also very understanding mother. A moment later her husband emerged, looking as Harry had seen him Friday night, but wearing a sweatsuit and carrying a larger box which was closed with a lot of Sellotape.

"Abby! How many are you bringing tonight? Bubbe says you still haven't told her."

Abby Pelta stopped and her brow creased as she considered this question. "Well, there's Rose. She's the new Fellow. And she said she wants to bring her fiancé, Winthrop or Winslow or something like that. Very upper-crust. Don't snap at him if he acts a bit like he's at the theatre; he's never been before."

Her husband harrumphed. "Probably Lord of Something-or-other, had a father or grandfather who was a Nazi sympathizer. Is that it?"

"Now, Jon, stop that. You can be such a reverse elitist. No. There was someone else...Let me think...Oh, right. Ruben said he can make it. So that makes three."

"Ruben?"

She rolled her eyes. "My research assistant."

"I thought his name was Curtis."

"It is. Ruben Curtis. I've called him Curtis for over seven months. Then, the other day he finally told me that he took exception to it, so I'm trying to remember to call him by his first name. Turned out that's why he'd been so growly all this time. Americans. Incredibly tetchy. What are you doing?"

"Just taking some more dishes to the shed before I go for my run. This is the last lot."

Harry panicked; what if he noticed the tent? But Jonathan Pelta put the box down with a grunt; clearly it was very heavy. He put his hands on his lower back and grimaced. *Not lifting with his legs*, Harry thought.

"Finally," his wife said with a sigh. "I supposed Bubbe is--"

"Yes. Scrubbing everything in the kitchen to within an inch of its life. Don't worry, Abby. She'll be fine. She's old, but she likes doing it. Keeps her busy."

Ruth's mother looked up at her husband with moist eyes. "Busy enough that she hasn't heard the news?"

He nodded. "You know how she is. If the news isn't in Yiddish, it doesn't exist."

"Don't I wish..." His wife sat down on the kitchen steps with her box on her lap and he sat next to her, his arm around her shoulder. "What are we going to do, Jon? It's happening, it's finally happening...."

He nodded and put his cheek on her hair. "We knew this was a possibility...."

His wife jerked up. "You're damn right we knew! But would anyone listen? No, it sounded wonderful to everyone that the driving age was being lowered to sixteen. Parents wouldn't have to cart their children around any more--children who were old enough to leave school, but not old enough to drive legally. It sounded like a perfectly logical, practical move. Goodness knows I *do* find it convenient that Ruth can drive herself. Of course, at the same time, they slipped in the new conscription age, and the fact that it's *mandatory* for young men *and* women. How long do you think they've been planning this war, Jon? How long do you think they've been intending to sacrifice our sons and daughters on some political altar? I mean, look at the situation with 'non-essential' appliances like tumble-dryers. There's this mysterious shortage for more than ten years, and all the government will say is, 'No comment.' What have they been doing? Using the metal to build more instruments of war? How long do you think they've been stockpiling?"

"Now, now--we don't know there's actually going to be a war..."

"Not going to be a war! You *heard* the news this morning! The Soviets caught a *British* spy in Helsinki. He had a briefcase full of American currency. That's what's used for arms deals. Well, that and drug deals. And they say they have evidence that the money was part of an arms sale to the rebels. With the Soviets on one side of the Finnish civil war, and us on the other...."

"It's not just us and you know it. The Americans have had that 'peacekeeping force' there for a year."

"Right. A lot of bloody peace it's bought. But they've got so many people in America; they haven't had mandatory conscription during war time since Viet Nam. They can just use reserves, they have so many people. We don't have that luxury here..."

"I know it's not just us; it's all of NATO. And if there's a war, it'll be all out. Us and them. You heard the report; Castro is issuing an ultimatum to Washington: get out of Finland or else. And the Chinese and Vietnamese

are getting involved now too. It's going to be the entire Communist world versus the non-Communist world. It's going to be a bloody disaster, and Helsinki isn't going to be the only front."

Ruth's father sighed. "And now that our government, in its infinite wisdom, has enacted mandatory conscription for anyone sixteen or older who's not enrolled in school--"

"Joel," she whispered softly, looking up at him pleadingly. He shook his head.

"I don't know what it is with him. His A-levels were fantastic, and then, as soon as he started at Durham, it all went to hell..."

"That was two years ago. And he started *one week* after they lowered the driving age and passed the new conscription law..."

"Sarah's marks are fine..."

"Yes, but you *know* what will happen if Joel has to leave uni and go into the army. She'll follow him. They're twins. Even though she's a girl and he's a boy....she'll *find* a way to be near him. I never wanted my daughters to serve in the military, Jon. I know that doesn't sound very feminist....But that's why I didn't want to move to Haifa when the twins were small, even though that flat on Einstein was perfect, and so close to the market....And a lot of good it's done us now, not to move to Israel. We still have to worry about terrorism, we still have to worry about our daughters going to war, and at a younger age than any other industrialized nation. *And* now one of *our spies* is about to cause World War Three."

Harry felt his knees buckle under him and struggled to stay on his feet. The Muggle political situation was far worse than he realized, just from looking at the fragment of newspaper he'd brought back to Hogwarts from Maggie's flat. And now he knew why he had felt compelled to ask Ruth how old she was when they were preparing to drive to the park....Somehow, the legal driving age from his old life had become rather fuzzy in his brain. Now he remembered: It *used* to be seventeen. He had had no expectation of learning to drive a car in this life (truthfully, he hadn't had much of an expectation of this in his old life, either) and so it simply wasn't an issue for him.

But *war*? This government had led the country to the brink of *war*? Harry thought back to Heir, to the recitation of crimes he had given....Harry tried to remember whether a civil war in Finland was mentioned. This was *his* doing, he knew. The Heir's. But technically, it was someone else's fault.

It was all *his* fault.

If he hadn't changed the timelines....

He watched in a daze as the Peltas kissed each other goodbye. "You'd better go," Ruth's father told his wife, "before Oxford Road becomes a car park." He watched his wife carry her box to the car, then he picked up his own box again, carrying it to the shed to put it away. Harry saw him look right at the tent, then away, opening the shed door, then locking it when he was done. Afterward, he looked at the tent yet again, frowning, but then the kitchen door opened and Harry saw a very old woman standing there, speaking rapidly, presumably in Yiddish.

"I'm coming, Bubbe, I'm coming..." he said, his voice tired, as he returned to the house. *So much for the morning run*, Harry thought, missing this morning ritual himself. He returned to the tent and took off the cloak. Draco was sitting at the table, chewing and looking at Harry strangely.

"Took you long enough," he said through the food in his mouth. He swallowed. "All you were supposed to be doing was putting the cat out."

"I know, but things are very, very bad." Harry explained the political situation to Draco, who looked nonplused. "You don't understand," Harry said with more than a little frustration. "It's all my fault. This isn't how things were before. We *have* to change the timelines as soon as possible...."

Draco still didn't look like he was taking the situation as seriously as Harry needed him to. Draco had always been thoroughly of the wizarding world. He'd never given a second thought to Muggle politics. "Fine. We'll get the train to Leicester tonight. Soon we'll be in London, then we'll head to Dover. We're making progress. If it all gets changed, *none* of this will have happened, right? So what's it matter if we rush about?"

Harry drew his lips into a line. "People will still be suffering. And that suffering is *real*."

Draco sighed, as though he were the one who had given up on trying to talk sense into a stubborn person. "So. How do we get the train tickets?"

Harry furrowed his brow. "Ruth just left for school. I suppose we'll have to wait until she gets home."

"Why don't we write in the diary some more?"

Harry mulled it over. How did he know Draco hadn't been writing in the diary while he was standing outside, listening to the Peltas and Ruth and her friend? The book was sitting in the middle of the table, the quill resting atop it. Harry looked in his friend's face for some sign, but this morning Draco looked friendly and guileless.

"I suppose. I'll go first."

As Harry picked up the quill, he looked at Draco again. For a second, Harry thought he had an odd red light behind his eyes. Harry squinted and looked again, but now it was gone. He shook his head and opened the book. Had he really seen that, or had he just imagined it?

Harry put the quill to the paper and began to write....

* * * * *

They heard Ruth return home in the late afternoon, calling to her great-grandmother, and then they heard her go out again. A moment later, the kitchen door opened for a second time.

"Where are you going?" her mother's voice carried to the tent.

"To see that sick friend again. I'll be back soon."

"Ruthie! This isn't the time! We're almost ready to start, our guests are in the living room, including Dee...."

"Mum, it will just take a few minutes, honest! Come on, it's a *mitzvah*..."

Harry heard her mother sigh. "All right, all right, just drive carefully...."

The kitchen door closed and Harry heard the car start. He realized too late that Ruth would go to the park, fail to find them, and worry....

But by the time he had pulled out the Invisibility Cloak to run to the car and stop her, she had sped off. He returned to the tent and pulled off the cloak again, sitting down dejectedly on one of the chairs. Draco was napping on the lower bunk. Harry thought he might be a bit drained from writing in the diary. Harry was feeling a bit drained from writing himself. He glanced at the diary warily, wondering how strong he would be by the time Riddle could emerge from it, how well he would be able to be the one in charge, in control of the situation. He remembered confronting Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets, and the trip into the diary he'd taken, seeing the young Dumbledore and the former headmaster, Dippet, who had had no idea that Riddle was responsible for Myrtle's death because he'd released the basilisk from the chamber. And Hagrid....it had changed Hagrid's life....

At length, Harry heard the car door slam again, and heard the back door open. "Ruth! Where have you been?" came her mother's voice. "We've been--"

"Oh, Mum!" Ruth cried, tears in her voice. "He's gone! He isn't there! I looked all over. Oh, I'm so worried...."

"Ruth--" her mother said more softly now. Harry heard her footsteps on the pavement. He put on the cloak and went out into the garden, and near the kitchen door he saw mother and daughter embracing, Ruth's shoulders convulsing while her mother tried to reassure her with a shaking voice. "I'm sure--I'm sure he'll be fine, love--"

Ruth shook her head, and Harry could see the tears running down her face. What must she be thinking? he wondered. His stomach clenched as a fresh wave of guilt washed over him. Great, he thought. One more thing I've botched.

They went inside, a rectangle of light spilling onto the walk for a moment and then disappearing. Harry turned to Draco and shook his shoulder to wake him. "We need to pack," he said when the grey eyes had finally opened. "And we need to let Ruth know we're all right and get the tickets from her."

Draco rubbed his eyes and sat up. "How are we going to do that?"

"Well--" Harry hesitated. "I suppose I'll just go knock on the door and ask to speak to her. The train doesn't leave for more than two hours, but it'll be leaving without us if we don't."

Draco nodded and started moving slowly. Harry brushed past him impatiently, and Draco gave him a *look* which made Harry freeze; there it was again, a flash of red behind his grey eyes, like someone who'd had their picture taken with a Muggle camera while they were looking directly at the bulb. Once again, it took only a moment to pass, and soon the two of them had reduced their portable belongings to the usual small, manageable size. Harry had Draco wait on the walk while he went to the door. He knocked tentatively, but there was no answer. He tried again. Nothing.

He turned to look at Draco, who shrugged. "Maybe they can't hear," he suggested. "You know, if they're not in the kitchen. We should try the front door."

Harry nodded and they walked out the garden gate and around to the front of the house, but when he saw the door, Harry was startled. He stopped, confused. The front door was open. He could hear voices spilling out through it, and smell wonderful aromas which made his stomach move within him, longing for something other than the sandwiches and tea on which they'd been living. He could see the flickering of candlelight and sometimes a person moving back and forth, too quickly for him to tell who it was. The two nomads stood in the circle of light from the lamppost, looking longingly into the house, and finally Harry decided, *This is stupid. They know she's been visiting someone sick. I'll just go knock at the door and say it's me...*

He took a breath and walked toward the door. He could see through the opening that the living room had been turned into a large dining room, and Harry realized that he hadn't noticed the existence of a dining room in the small house; they must normally eat in the kitchen. But this looked like a special occasion. The table was laid with pristine white linen and beautifully painted china, silver glittered at each place and each diner had a crystal wine glass and one for water as well.

He heard Jonathan Pelta's voice speaking as he had when he was giving his sermon on Friday night, rather than the way he'd sounded when speaking to his wife in the garden. "This year, we are here, next year in the Land of Israel. This year we are slaves, next year we shall be free...." Then he said something Harry thought might be Yiddish. Perhaps he was translating for his wife's grandmother. Harry remembered his wife talking about why she had decided against their moving to Israel. Did she think Israel might be safer now that war with the Soviet Union might be imminent?

He waited for Ruth's father to finish speaking and was raising his hand to knock when he heard Ruth's clear voice saying, "*Why is this night different from all other nights?*"

He would have stopped himself if he could have, but his hand was already heading toward the door, and he had knocked before he knew what was happening. He saw a young aristocratic man with honey-blond hair turn in shock, his blue eyes opening wide. Then a very, very old woman swung the door open, and upon seeing Harry standing there, with his long hair and beard, looking weary and travel-worn and with a tent slung on his back, she backed up with her hand on her chest and would have collapsed had her granddaughter not grasped her around the waist.

Ruth's mother also looked in shock at Harry, while she hugged her grandmother to her and repeated, "Bubbe, Bubbe..."

Ruth had stopped her recitation and came running around the table from where she'd been sitting, throwing her arms around him. "Oh! You're all right!" she cried. Then she abruptly disconnected herself, coloring deeply and looking furtively at her parents. Her friend from the morning, Dee, was looking at the two of them with one eyebrow raised, a smile playing around her mouth. Ruth had the presence of mind to dash to her great-grandmother to find out how she was. Harry heard a quick exchange in Yiddish, then Ruth returned to him and said in a rushed whisper, "What are you *doing* here? You weren't in the park when I went..."

"I'm sorry. We had to leave. Someone from the Ministry of Magic came..." he said as quietly as he could, looking at the other guests' reactions to the uproar he'd caused.

"Yes, well--now Bubbe thinks you're *Elijah*. Congratulations," she said in the same frantic whisper.

"She thinks I'm--what?" his voice rose slightly. Ruth's great-grandmother pointed at him in silent horror, her eyes wild. Ruth whirled on her, and she and her mother simultaneously tried to reassure the old woman in rapid-fire Yiddish.

Harry had a chance in the meantime to glance around at the other guests and smile feebly in mute apology. In addition to Ruth's friend Dee, who was wearing a purple cardigan and jeans instead of her school uniform, and the wealthy-looking blond man Harry had already noticed, there was a very self-possessed dark-haired woman of about thirty who rather hung on the blond man with an air of possession. Harry guessed that she was Rose, the Fellow at the University of whom Ruth's mother had spoken, and the blond man must be her upper-crust fiancé, of whom Ruth's father had spoken in distinctly uncomplimentary terms. That left the small, twitchy bespectacled man who seemed to be in his mid-twenties (despite his receding hairline) to fill the role of Ruben, alias Curtis, alias Ruben Curtis, Abby Pelta's research assistant from America.

When they had gotten the old woman settled in her chair again with a glass of water and explained to her that Harry was the sick friend Ruth had been visiting, Ruth was able to explain to him that they were celebrating the first night of Passover with a Seder, as they would also on the second night (that would be at the Centre for Jewish Studies at the university, where Abby Pelta was known as Professor Pelta). She also explained that at every Seder, an extra place was set at the table for the prophet Elijah and the door left open for him, just in case he decided to join the family for their repast. Harry grimaced upon realizing that he was so hairy and travel-worn that an old woman had mistaken him for a five-thousand-year-old prophet. He took in the place setting that sat before an empty chair, realizing that that was Elijah's place.

Then more mayhem erupted when Draco suddenly knocked on the doorjamb, saying, "What's taking so long?" then freezing when the elderly woman began her screams anew and Ruth hurriedly explained to her and her parents that this was the friend of the sick friend.

When the dust had settled, Harry and Draco were both invited to stay, and another place was laid for Draco so that there were now ten at the table. Ruth had introduced them as 'Hal' and 'Drake,' not giving them a chance to give their Dudley and Piers aliases, which they hadn't told her. Dee wouldn't let up grinning knowingly at Ruth, who had been visiting not one but two young men without telling her best friend. Then Dee turned to Jonathan Pelta and said, "Shouldn't we set another extra place? Now that the one that was laid is being used?"

Ruth's father looked thoughtfully at Harry and Draco, and Harry decided that he liked him quite a lot as a slow smile spread across his face. "I don't think so. I can recognize prophetic visitors when I see them." He gave them a wink, and Harry couldn't help smiling back at him, and feeling very welcome.

The meal and ritual finally continued. Harry was next to Ruth and Draco was next to Dee, who was looking very appreciatively at him. Draco was less admiring of her, but took notice of Rose, the university Fellow, and in fact, seemed intent on memorizing the pattern on her dress while Ruth picked up the slim book on her plate and resumed the recitation which Harry had interrupted when he'd knocked at the door.

"*Why is this night different from all other nights?*" she read in the same clear voice. "*For on all other nights, we do not dip the vegetables even once; and on this night we dip them twice. For on all other nights, we eat both bread and matza, and on this night we eat only matza. For on all other nights we eat all other herbs; and on this night we eat bitter herbs. For on all other nights, we eat sitting up or leaning, on this night we all eat leaning...*" Harry watched her profile in the flickering candlelight, feeling almost like he was out of his body, like when he was doing the pain-blocking. He could be in any time or place through the centuries when people had gathered in their homes with friends and family and reenacted this ritual....

When they were given a paste-like dollop of something on small plates, he put some on his fork tentatively, hesitating before putting it in his mouth. "Why aren't there any apples in the *charoset*?" Rose-the-Fellow said in a whine. Her sudden interjection brought Harry abruptly back to the present, and he looked about to try to determine what she was talking about.

Ruth's mother smiled stiffly at her colleague (or was she really more like her student? he wondered) and said, "This is *haroset all'italiana*. This year we're doing an Italian and Sephardic Seder, with foods and traditions from my husband's side of the family. They're from Spain and Italy. Last year we did an *Ashkenazy* Seder, in honor of my family's traditions. We take turns. *Haroset all'italiana* is a paste of ground dates, oranges, raisins and figs. It's really a very nice change from the apple-based *charoset*. Give it a try."

Now that Harry knew what was in front of him, he tried it. It was very thick and almost cloyingly sweet, but it was also a relief to have some sort of fruit after weeks of eating from the paper sack. Rose looked less than enthusiastic about not having the sort of Seder to which she was accustomed.

Harry, however, was in food heaven. Not since Hermione had prepared the Greek dinner at four, Privet Drive had he eaten so well, and that

included a few fabulous feasts at Hogwarts, in both his lives. Readings were interspersed with the food, but once he had begun, Harry largely noticed the food. Next they had *carciofi alla romana*, a simple dish of artichokes prepared with chopped parsley; minced garlic, olive oil, salt and pepper. Harry closed his eyes while he ate, chewing slowly, and he thought Draco would actually kiss Dee if she told him he had to in order to get some more of the delicious artichokes.

When they were presented with cubes of fried white fish in an herb vinaigrette with caramelized onions, Harry thought he heard Rose muttering something about *gefilte fish*, whatever that was, but if this was another aberration in the Fellow's mind, her objections were soon drowned out by the "Mmmms" and, "Oh, that's so *good*," being uttered almost unanimously around the table. Harry was surprised that the egg-drop soup did not have the matzoh balls that had appeared in the chicken soup Ruth had brought them, but then he remembered that that was her great-grandmother's soup, and this was a dish from her father's family.

He received quite a shock when the main course was--lasagna. It turned out to be *tortino di azzine*, a matzoh lasagna which included vegetables and lamb. Jonathan Pelta also passed round something he called *insalata alla Sefardita*, which was a salad of romaine, dill and green onions with red wine vinaigrette. Just when he thought he couldn't hold any more, Ruth carried out *ricciarelli di Siena* from the kitchen, which were very, very rich almond-paste cookies rolled in powdered sugar.

Draco leaned over the table while dessert was being eaten and gestured to Harry. Harry leaned over to hear Draco say, "Are you sure we can't go to Italy instead of Do--?"

"Sssh!" Harry said suddenly, then froze when he realized they were all looking at him. He had shushed Draco rather loudly, but he'd been desperate for no one to hear the word "Dover." He smiled feebly again and the conversation continued, although Harry noticed that Dee was looking very interested in what he and Draco had been saying, and he wondered whether she would be able to figure out what it was.

Then Ruth explained to her parents that "Hal" and "Drake" needed to get a train, and that she wanted to drive them to the station. Her mother looked at her husband with a dubious expression.

"Your father will go too, Ruth."

"But Mum--"

"It's late. That's all there is to it," her mother said with finality, and Ruth shut her mouth abruptly, but Harry could still see the rebellion in her face. Remembering her sneaking a smoke near the potting shed that morning, he realized she had more than a little rebel in her.

"I have to get something first," she said indistinctly, running to the stairs. Harry assumed that she was fetching the train tickets. When she returned, she was wearing her coat. Harry and Draco thanked the Peltas for letting them stay and followed Ruth and her father to the car.

Harry and Draco sat in the back seat after Ruth's father helped them put their things in the car's boot. He started the car, but didn't put it in motion, instead turning about to look at Harry and Draco.

"You're like Ruth, aren't you?" he said suddenly, and Harry had a sudden urge to run, but found that he was frozen in place. Had Ruth told her father about them? His mouth hung open and he looked at Ruth, who likewise looked at her father in amazement.

"Ruthie didn't tell me. I guessed. When she's been contacted by strangers in the last four months, we've usually found that they're other--people like her. Like that girl who plays the cello--"

"Hermione Granger, Daddy," Ruth said, rolling her eyes. "She's only somewhat *famous*."

"Yes. Well, at least she remembered that she could call you on the phone." He turned to the back seat. "Do you know she sent a letter to Ruth using an *owl*? The bloody thing practically gave *me* a heart attack, and I'm much stronger than my wife's grandmother." Harry tried not to laugh; he wasn't sure now whether he should have helped Hermione buy Sebastian. "Anyway--we've always known that Ruth was--special. But sometimes it was a little hard to remember why..."

Memory charms, Harry thought. Although that wouldn't have been the rule until Ruth was around six or seven. They would probably have memories of times before that, if any, when she'd performed accidental magic.

"So she told you about the concert in London during the holidays..." Harry said slowly. Her father nodded. "And about the school..."

"Yes. And now it's not going to happen, of course. An odd man came to see us a few weeks back to tell us about that. But he also said Ruth and the family would no longer be 'obliviated,' whatever that is, when she accidentally does--things. Although they'll still investigate to make sure Duggles don't see any of it."

"Muggles," Harry said automatically.

"Oh, right. Muggles." He turned to smile at Ruth. "I guess that would be me, eh?"

"Yes, Daddy, normally, but he meant anyone outside of the family," Ruth said, and even in the dim light, Harry could see her coloring. Harry felt strange, this Muggle rabbi with the witch daughter knowing that they were wizards.

"So," he said, turning to speak to them again. "I know you're--what you are. I know you're off to get a train and that you've been sick. What I don't know is why you're traveling at all, and using such pedestrian methods. I thought your sort would have other ways of getting around."

Harry and Draco looked at each other, and Harry had opened his mouth to speak, but Draco did it first "We're trying to avoid other wizards. We're spies, and we're trying to avert a war. The civil war in Finland has largely been stirred up by Dark Wizards, and we're attempting to stop them. We can't afford to be seen by anyone who might recognize us. It's very dicey, but it's also against our laws to interfere in Muggle politics as they've done." Where had *that* come from? Harry wondered. Draco's voice sounded very odd, not quite like his own.

Ruth's father opened his eyes very wide; Harry realized they hadn't actually given Ruth a rationale for why they were traveling, other than Harry escaping from prison, and she turned around and gave them both such an admiring and hopeful gaze that Harry sincerely hoped they'd be able to fix the timelines and avert the impending war before any more lives were lost.

Jonathan Pelta turned around to the steering wheel now and put the idling car into motion. "Right! We're off, then! We've got to do something to assure that peace breaks out!" He smiled at them over his shoulder, and Harry returned it, wishing Draco had let him do the talking, but admitting to himself that it was a pretty good story, and partly true, after all. If they succeeded, they *would* be averting a war.

Or hurtling right into the middle of a different one....

* * * * *

Their train was leaving Manchester Picadilly at ten o'clock and they managed to reach the station twenty minutes before that. Harry wished he could have more time to talk to Ruth and her father, but time was very, very short, and Harry was hoping that, having called attention to themselves in Manchester the previous evening, there weren't Ministry Aurors lurking somewhere on the platform, trying to find out whether the Disarming Charm had been performed by Harry Potter, escaped convict.

When the train arrived, Harry turned to Ruth and said quietly to her, "You've no idea how much--I mean--" He had no words; she had been an immeasurable comfort at a dreadful time, and on top of everything else, to have had the patience to teach him the *Kaddish*....

"It's a *mitzvah*," she said thickly, the same thing she'd said to her mother. "Don't worry about it." But her voice was thick and her eyes were shining. Harry smiled at her and leaned over to kiss her cheek briefly.

"Thank you." She swallowed and nodded, then he had to turn away from her and follow Draco onto the train. When he turned to look, Ruth and her father were still standing on the platform; Jonathan Pelta's arm was around his daughter's shoulders, and he looked down at her fondly and-- Harry thought--proudly, as well. Harry thought of her resignation at learning that she wouldn't be able to go to Hogwarts after all. That was another reason for fixing the timelines. *You're supposed to be at Hogwarts*, he thought. *You're supposed to be Ginny's friend, you're supposed to be learning everything you need to know to be a well-educated witch*. As the train began moving, he lifted his hand to her and smiled, and Ruth and her father lifted their hands in response. When he could no longer see them, he leaned back next to Draco and closed his eyes, remembering her at the large table in Hagrid's garden for Ginny's birthday party the previous spring in his old life, and looking forward to seeing her in her proper place at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall of Hogwarts again....

* * * * *

They disembarked at Stafford and waited just a few minutes for the connecting train to Nuneaton. It was now after eleven o'clock at night. In less than half-an-hour they were in Nuneaton and disembarking again. The next train showed up promptly, less than ten minutes later, and soon they were on the last leg of their trip. As the lights in the town gave way to the dark countryside, towering trees and tranquil fields sped by, and Harry felt himself being lulled to sleep. He allowed it to happen, as they would probably have to walk for a bit to find an unpopulated place from which to take flight, and he needed enough rest to make both the walk and the flight possible. He hadn't actually flown since before he'd come down with the fever, and he didn't imagine he'd be able to go very far this night.

From the train station they headed southeast; they'd asked an old man outside the station where the nearest farms were (Harry made it seem then were looking for work), and that was the direction he pointed. After trudging along for an hour, they came to a place called Stoneygate, but it still had the air of a prosperous suburb and had too many houses for Harry's comfort. Moving on, they reached Evington after another half-hour, but that still wasn't quite right. When a sign by the edge of the road announced that they'd reached Stoughton, Harry knew they'd be all right. There were several large farms or estates on either side of the main road, and a spinney in the distance on one large, rolling piece of property. Perfect terrain for take-off. It was two-thirty in the morning, and no one should be around to see them.

Harry started to give out, however, after only about a half-hour in the air. Not wanting to spontaneously transfigure in mid-air, he set down at a place called King's Norton. There was a lot of open land, more big estates and farms. They set up camp in a copse of trees and settled in for the night. To save batteries, they didn't turn on the torch and write in the diary, but went right to sleep.

The next morning they resumed walking, keeping a steady pace, but they'd only gotten as far as Welham when they'd been walking four hours. They'd actually set out six hours earlier, but had rested for two in the middle. And they hadn't set out until noon, sleeping rather late.

Harry didn't try to fly that night, and the next day, they walked for four hours again; resting for two in the middle still seemed necessary. They did manage to leave earlier, though, setting out at ten o'clock in the morning. They reached Rushton, Northamptonshire by the time they'd walked their four hours. Life was still uneventful. They both wrote in the diary, Draco still a little more than Harry. Harry thought about all of the dreadful things that could happen if they didn't fix the timelines soon, and wished he dared stop in a village to buy a newspaper, find out how bad things were. Had Washington responded to Castro's ultimatum? Were China and Vietnam really involved? What about the captured British spy?

Harry decided they'd dawdled long enough and he wanted to speed things up again. He was going to try flying this night for three or four hours, with twenty minute rests every forty minutes. After they'd had their first sleep, they woke and packed up the tent without talking. Harry transfigured and spread his wings and Draco climbed onto his back, bearing all of the other gear. Harry leapt into the sky, beating his wings back and forth, wishing they'd dared to bring brooms. He tried not to think about being tired or fatigued, but pushed on. He could do this; he'd done it before. All that rest from being ill had made him soft.

But after only about half an hour, Draco suddenly cried out above him. It was a dreadful, pained exclamation, and Harry felt the clutching fingers leave his mane. *What is he doing? Harry wondered. He'll fall for sure...*

And as soon as he thought it, it happened. Draco's body was hurtling out of the sky and Harry, in a panic, beat his wings frantically against the suddenly very heavy air, trying to get under him again. He succeeded for a moment, then felt odd, and started falling himself. He'd been jolted out of his Animagus form and was also going down, down, and an excruciating pain was radiating throughout his body, originating in his left forearm. *The Dark Mark. The Death Eaters are being summoned.*

He had been jerked out of his Animagus form by the activation of the Mark, that's how powerful it was. The ground was rushing up at a frightful rate. Harry was falling with Draco above him, and he put all his effort and concentration into transfiguring back, trying to ignore the pain, but he

spread his wings too late and landed awkwardly, and Draco fell on top of him and then onto the ground with a loud thud and a sickening *crack!* Harry immediately took on his human form again, and the moment he did, the pain radiating from his left forearm took over his body again, joined now by the pain emanating from his right wrist, which had bent back in a way it wasn't meant to when he landed. He glanced at Draco, who was screaming and holding his left ankle with one hand and his arm with the other.

Harry wasn't sure how long they'd been on the ground, rolling around in pain, when he finally thought of doing the pain blocking. But he glanced at his best friend, face contorted in agony, and decided he too could tolerate it. It just didn't seem fair for him to be able to escape the pain when Draco couldn't. They both bore the Mark.

At length, the pain subsided and they were left with just the throbbing wrist and ankle to worry about. It took them far longer than usual to erect the tent, and when they had, Harry couldn't bear the thought of trying to pull himself up into the top bunk, and he collapsed on the ground, hugging his wrist to him, hoping sleep would eventually take over his mind and give him some respite from the pain.

* * * * *

Harry wasn't sure what woke him, the voices or the eerie feeling that *creatures*, large, fast and dangerous creatures, were streaking by the tent. He could hear hoofbeats and sensed a lot of movement beyond the confines of the canvas walls, and felt uneasy. Where are we? he wondered. Had they inadvertently set up in the middle of a town? Last night, even in the dark and the delirium from their mutual pain, it had looked like any grassy meadow on any farm. Normally, they would have sought the shelter of a copse of trees, or a spinney, but Harry knew that Draco's ankle made it impractical to try to move any farther at the moment. And with his damaged wrist, Harry couldn't begin to contemplate carrying him. They'd set up camp exactly where they'd fallen.

Harry resisted the urge to look outside, to find out what was going on. Whatever it was, everyone seemed to be blissfully ignorant of the wizarding tent in their midst. The Muggle-repelling charms were still working, he thought thankfully.

But he'd no sooner thought this when he heard the unmistakable sound of hooves biting into the damp sod near the mouth of the tent, as though a horse had just made a jump and was preparing to continue on. Harry heard an agitated whinny and a female voice trying to soothe the beast, saying, "There, there, Granny, take it easy....It'll be all right...."

Then there was another whinny and an *oof!* and a thud, and Harry heard the hoofbeats retreating into the distance. Next, he heard someone

struggling to their feet, and then angry footsteps in what turned out to be very expensive riding boots heading straight for their tent. Uh-oh, thought Harry. If a Muggle is angry enough, do the charms not work?

Then he got the shock of his life when the thrown rider put her head into the tent. She, in turn, appeared equally shocked as her body followed her head, looking amazed that she could stand up straight, that it was a small room instead of the tiny space implied by its outward appearance. She stared at the *furniture*, then swallowed and took off her riding gloves and dome-shaped helmet, shaking out her gleaming cap of golden hair, glancing around at the tent's interior. There was a great deal of mud on her posterior, probably from the fall, Harry assumed.

"*Bloody hell,*" she breathed while she looked around, then when her eyes lit on Harry, her wrath returned anew. "Listen, I don't know who the hell you are or what you think you're doing setting up a tent here, but we're trying to run a charity point-to-point and this bloody thing is right where I was trying to land when Granny jumped that hedge. It's the best spot, if you go through the cut...."

Harry stared at her. "*Granny?*"

She looked extraordinarily hacked off. "Granny's Ghost. The grey I was riding. *Was* being the operative term. She was spooked by the damn tent and dumped me off. Bloody lucky I didn't break anything." She rubbed her rump, wincing. Harry was trying not to smile, but it was difficult.

"You mean a ghost was spooked?" He managed not to laugh outright. She drew her lips into an obstinate line.

"This is *not* funny--"

"Alicia, calm down--"

"I will *not* calm--what did you say? How do you know my name?" Alicia Spinnet scrutinized him more closely now, but still didn't seem to have any clue as to why he would know her. Then Draco started to wake and stretched, yawning hugely, his eyes still closed. He sat up, then swung his legs to the ground and put his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes, still not looking around. Finally, he lifted his head, and upon seeing her, swore colorfully and put his head back in his hands. She smirked.

"Good morning to you too. As I was telling your friend--" She stopped and squinted at Draco, looking like she was thinking furiously. "You look familiar...."

Draco ran his hand over his shorn hair, grimacing. "You saw me with more hair at the concert in London." So, Harry thought, he recognizes her too.

Her eyes opened wide. "That's it! You're--um--you're--"

"Draco Malfoy," he drawled. "Glad I'm so memorable," he said, sounding a little snitty. But she ignored him and turned to Harry.

"But who are you?"

Harry shuffled nervously. He finally just blurted it out. "Harry Potter." She frowned, then opened her eyes wide.

"Good Lord! It *is* you! Didn't you--"

"Escape from prison after being sent there for killing my mother. Yes," he said quietly, not bothering to make excuses. She couldn't very well go running to a telephone out in the middle of the field. Her rather tight riding clothes didn't seem to allow for a telephone.

"She was trying to kill someone else and he stopped her," Draco said, making Harry's excuse for him. "Not that anyone gave a damn about that."

Alicia looked around the tent, still dazed. "So this is--"

"A magic tent. Yeah," Draco said, almost sounding bored. "Muggles see it, but forget about it right away."

"Oh, that explains it. It looked to me like the *horses* knew something was wrong. I could see that from some distance; they were all hesitating just a bit. But the other riders didn't notice anything wrong, so they were just slapping their horses, telling them to get on with it and buck up and all that....I *noticed*, and I suppose Granny felt me hesitate or something..."

"You're not a Muggle, you're a witch, so the Muggle-repelling charms don't affect you. Sorry it's got in the way of your little horse race. We didn't know we'd set it up in the middle of bleeding Ascot."

She put her hands on her hips, reminding Harry of the Head Girl he'd known in his other life. "Don't you get snide with me. It's not a track; my mother's club is holding a charity point-to-point to aid Finnish refugees. The money is made by people placing bets; all the money that isn't won goes to the refugees. I've been trying to get the grey ready for a race in a few days; she's been nervous and temperamental lately. I thought the point-to-point would be nice for her, running on grass, racing across the countryside instead of going round and round like at the track. But she's gone off without me now. And I've only just recently talked my mum and dad into letting *me* ride Granny when we race her; I've been trying for years to convince mum especially that I don't want to do dressage forever. Dressage is for ladies, you see; racing is for hooligan men. I mean, yes, I'm *good* at dressage," she said, without a trace of self-

awareness at how vain this sounded, "and I was on the Olympic team and all," she continued, "but it just gets bloody *boring*."

Harry admired her compact little body; she was rather small, smaller than many adult male jockeys he'd seen, so that was an advantage. And she certainly seemed determined, which couldn't hurt, he supposed. Her only problem at the moment was that she suffered from a distinct lack of horse.

"Well, we have a bit of a problem ourselves," he told her, holding out his damaged wrist. "The reason we set up here is that we're both injured. It's worse for Draco; it's his ankle."

"You're lucky you didn't camp one field over. Those aren't cows, you know, they're bullocks. And as we've seen with the horses, I don't think animals are affected by your Muggle-repelling spells."

She set about examining each of them, looking very experienced about it, Harry thought. She'd probably suffered numerous fall-related injuries over the years, he assumed, working with horses. After looking at Harry's wrist and Draco's ankle, she gave her verdict.

"Sprains. Both of them. You each need an ace bandage and you," she said, pointing at Draco, "need to keep off that ankle."

Harry and Draco looked at each other. "The problem is," Harry said, "when you're on the run, getting rest is a bit dicey. And we've recently both been ill, and resting far too much. We have to keep moving. It's taken us since Monday night just to get here from Leicester. By the way--what day is it?"

"Saturday. The twenty-sixth. Of April."

"We knew it was April...." Draco drawled. Harry gave him an evil look.

"Where do you need to go?" she said, her eyes wide. "Or doesn't it matter? As long as you don't get caught by your wizard police."

"Aurors. And, well--getting caught would be bad, but we're not just randomly running. We have to go to a few places. London, for a start. We're trying to avert war."

She frowned. "What?"

"The war in Finland. It's been fomented by dark wizards. It's rather a long story...."

She opened her eyes wide. "Really? And what can *you* do about it?"

Harry and Draco looked at each other. "We can't tell you," Harry said. "Sorry."

She didn't speak, but looked like she was thinking hard. Finally, she said, "Listen. I have my own place on my parents' estate. Used to be the lodge. I'm nineteen now, and I couldn't stand having Mum sticking her nose in my private affairs all the time. I mean, she acted like *I* was proposing murder every time I wanted to have a boyfriend over...." She glanced at them nervously. "There's no one right now, don't worry. I can fix up the two of you, right as rain, and you can rest there for the next week. Then I can just drive you down to London. It's only about an hour and a half from our place."

"Is that where we are? Sywell?"

"No. You're in Thorpe Malsor. Near Kettering. But our place is only about eight miles south of here. You're actually on Keaton's Folly Farm. Don't ask. The owners aren't named Keaton, either. It's an old name, like Thorpe Malsor. Where in London do you need to go?"

"Fulham. A place on Wardo Avenue."

She nodded. "I've been in the area. I know just how to go. I had a boyfriend lived around there for a while." Harry was starting to wonder how many boyfriends she'd had. Draco looked like he wanted to kiss her.

"Drive?" he said breathlessly. "Did you really say *drive*?"

She nodded, as though it were ludicrous to think there was any other way to travel about Britain. "Of course. We can do it next Friday. That'll give both of you some rest. I was going to meet some old school friends at the National Gallery that day. I can drop the two of you in Fulham first."

Harry grinned for the first time since spraining his wrist. "I don't know how we can thank you enough. And I'm--I'm sorry the thing with Hogwarts never happened. I still think you should have the chance to study magic...."

She sighed. "I don't know that I'm sorry. I mean, I'm out of school, and good riddance. I'm just glad I know what's going on now when strange things happen..."

Harry nodded. "Your parents must be relieved to know, too. You probably did a lot of odd things when you were younger."

"My parents? They don't know," she said, as though he should have guessed.

"They don't?"

She sighed. "I thought of telling them, but there just didn't seem to be any tactful way of saying, 'Oh, by the way, Mummy and Daddy, I'm a witch.' There don't seem to be any greeting cards in the shops for an occasion such as this. And then when that odd fellow showed up from your Ministry of Magic, telling me that because you'd escaped from prison I wasn't going to their ruddy school after all, I was so glad to live alone. He just appeared when I opened my door in the morning! Out of thin air! My dad would have had a heart attack. Mum would have taken so much of her migraine medicine she'd be in danger of an overdose."

Harry swallowed. He hadn't really thought about what things were like for the Muggle-born witches and wizards. One minute they were told they were magical and going to a school of witchcraft and wizardry, the next moment they were told, *Sorry, change of plan....*

Draco had another concern, however. "You, um, wouldn't happen to have a car nearby, would you?" He looked at her hopefully. She frowned, and he pointed at his ankle.

"Oh, quite right! Well, I can't take the two of you to the lodge straightaway. First I have to trudge back to the start of the point-to-point. That's probably where Granny's Ghost went. I'll just tell Mum and Dad she was spooked and leave it at that. Luckily, this isn't a part of the course where there are spectators. I'll come back for you later. I can drive my Range Rover over the fields without a problem."

Harry looked at her earnestly. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

She shrugged prettily. "It's all right. But you know," and she nodded at Harry, "you *really* could use a shave and a haircut." Then, abruptly, she left to begin the trek back to the spectators. Harry smiled. He could manage the shave and haircut once they were in her house; she'd get quite a shock, he thought, remembering Ruth.

They ate and wrote in the diary a little while waiting for her. Harry wasn't sure how long it was, but when he heard a rumbling motor advancing on their position, he resisted the urge to put his head out of the tent to check that it was her; if it wasn't, he'd be seen. The tent had Muggle repelling charms on it, but his head did not.

Harry felt the ground shake as a vehicle came to a halt near the tent. A minute later, Alicia entered, wearing jeans and a close-fitting pink T-shirt. She looked very young suddenly.

"Come on then. Let's get him to the car," she said to Harry, nodding at Draco. Getting out of the tent was awkward, but once they were out-of-doors, Draco put one arm across Harry's shoulders and one across Alicia's, and they half-carried, half-dragged him to the Range Rover. Harry and Alicia returned to the tent and she helped him take it down and pack it up,

marveling at the small size. They returned to the car and Alicia climbed into the driver's seat, while Harry took the place next to her. She started the car with a business-like air, and soon Harry had to grab onto the door with his left hand as they bumped over ruts and hillocks before finally driving onto a dirt track that eventually led out the gate of Keaton's Folly Farm. It only took about twenty minutes for them to reach her house in Sywell, the lodge on her parents' estate. It was a cozy-looking stone Neo-Gothic structure, the middle-ages romanticized. Harry and Alicia served as Draco's support again on the way into the house, and they deposited him on a sofa near the hearth in Alicia's living room. He looked relieved to be back in civilization.

She had soon bandaged up the two of them, and Draco sat by the fire with his head back, his foot on a pillow on a large ottoman. Harry had a sling around his neck in which his bandaged wrist rested. Surveying her patients with satisfaction, Alicia strode toward the door.

"You're all set. I'll be back soon."

"Wait!" Harry cried. "Where are you going?"

She turned. "Oh, sorry. I eat dinner up at my parents'. I hate to cook. I was going to nick some food from their kitchen to bring back for you. There are some biscuits in the kitchen and you can make yourselves some tea, but not much else, I'm afraid. I worry that if I'm around food, I'll just eat it without thinking. If I want to be the jockey for Granny's Ghost, I have to be careful of tendencies like that. The weighing-in is *very* important. Can't take any chances."

Harry nodded, and bade her goodbye. When she left, he sat down at the other end of the couch from Draco and reached for the television remote control on the ottoman, just as Draco was reaching for it. Harry got it first.

"Hey! I was going to try that. Erm--what is it?"

Harry grinned. "Too slow. And--you'll see." The black box sat on a large Regency-style chest of drawers that also held a stereo with impressively large speakers. When Harry pressed the *power* button it came to life. He flipped channels impatiently; finally, he found the news. He assumed that if Alicia was going to eat dinner with her parents, it was probably about the right time for the evening news.

Soon, he wished he hadn't checked and he had just found an old movie or an American comedy, as Draco wanted to do. It was too depressing. Footage was shown of men in fatigues crawling on their stomachs carrying rifles, doing drills; more footage was shown of shivering Finnish rebels, wrapped in layers of scarves but wearing fingerless gloves to manipulate

their weapons better, and then there was a report from Moscow on what the Kremlin had to say....

Harry swallowed and stood. "I'm going to take a shower." He hadn't asked Alicia about this, but he really felt the need.

"Does that mean that I get to watch what I want now?"

"If you like..."

Draco leaned back and began to flip through the channels, reminding Harry strongly of the way he'd been at Mrs. Figg's during the summer. "Wish wizards had this," he said with feeling, going through four more channel changes before Harry had even reached the doorway.

"They could do," Harry said, shrugging. "All you need is electricity. Plenty of wizards probably live close enough to Muggles that it would be thought strange if they didn't have electricity."

"I suppose..." Draco mumbled, going through three more channels, his eyes starting to glaze over. Well, thought Harry, better he turn into a zombie because of the television rather than because of Tom Riddle.

He realized once he'd disrobed that he wasn't certain whether he *could* take a shower; he removed the sling that had been supporting his arm, but he didn't know whether he was allowed to get the bandage wet that was immobilizing his wrist. He drew himself a bath instead, carefully keeping his right arm elevated above the water. It was awkward to handle the soap with his left hand; he kept dropping it. He concentrated very hard and reduced his facial hair to nothing, and shortened the hair on his head as well. (Less of it was easier to wash, especially with one hand.)

He was emerging from the tub and wrapping a towel around his waist when suddenly the door swung open and Alicia was standing there looking anxious. "Harry! Draco said--" Then she froze at the sight of him. "Oh," she said simply now. She shook her head suddenly and continued. "Um--Draco said you were taking a shower. You--you didn't get your bandage wet, did you?"

He held it up for her to see. "Dry as a bone. I decided on a bath for that very reason."

"Oh. Well. Good." She suddenly seemed at a loss for words, and seemed to be trying to appear not to be looking at his chest, then not looking at his legs. "I see you shaved and cut your hair," she finally said.

He ran his good hand through his hair; his head felt oddly light. "Actually, I use magic. Less messy."

"Oh. Right. Of course. You don't, er, need any help dressing, do you?" Harry couldn't tell whether she looked hopeful.

"Actually--do you have a washing machine? And an extra dressing gown, so I have something to wear while the clothes wash?"

"We'll have to wash the clothes tomorrow. I can take them up to my parents' house. But I have plenty of clothes for you to choose from. Follow me."

In the corridor outside the bath there was a freestanding wardrobe. She opened the door to reveal a hanging compartment and some shelves upon which were folded some very nice shirts.

"Let's see....You look about the same size as Franny..."

"Franny?"

"Two--no, that's not right--three boyfriends ago. Francis, really. Lovely, he was," she said wistfully, then sighed. "He raises quarter-horses. Went back to Dublin. He still rings me up, but the time before last he said he was seeing someone, so last time I said I was about to go out on a date and had to ring off. That was a few weeks ago, and I haven't heard from him since. Here we go! His rugby shirt. Don't worry; it's clean. And he's never actually worn it to play rugby. If he ever tried, he'd be eaten alive. Not exactly an athlete. And here are some jeans."

"Thanks," he mumbled, taking the clothes from her. She closed the wardrobe and he took the clothes into the bathroom to dress. When he emerged he had only the jeans on, which had been hard enough with one hand. "Can you help me with the shirt?" he asked, feeling foolish for turning down her help. She smiled and held it out for him, and he put his arms in the sleeves, wincing slightly; she raised it up and pulled it down over his head, then pulled it all the way down for him, as though she were dressing a small child.

He thanked her, looking down at her, wondering how strange her life had been. Accidental magic, memory charms, the Olympics, finding out she was a witch, having a fugitive wizard show up....

"Alicia," he said softly. "If there is a war--what will you do? Since you're out of school."

She frowned. "Mum wants me to go to uni, but I don't want to. Daddy says he's good friends with Lord Baines, and he can easily get me a commission and a position as an aide de camp. Glorified clerk, really. Me...I have different plans..."

"What?"

"Well....I've been talking to Hermione Granger." Harry was startled; it seemed Hermione had been a busy girl. Contacting Ruth and Alicia. Had she been in touch with all of the Muggle-born witches and wizards who'd come to the concert?

"What about?"

Alicia looked around furtively, as though someone could overhear them. "She's planning to go back to America, and if she does, I'm going with her. She said we could find out how to contact the wizarding community there and really learn about our abilities. She's got to think about the war too; she's also done school. And a cellist and a jockey can work just as easily in America as in England."

"But won't they be in the war as well?"

"Probably. But they probably won't send us back here to go into the army. And anyway, we could always go underground in the American wizarding community if we had to. You wizard types don't seem to show up on government radar. As far as I can tell, you don't pay taxes or have passports...."

Harry looked sheepish. "It's sort of like being a citizen of a country within a country."

"Like--like the Native Americans?"

"What?"

"Well, they have these things they live on called *reservations*, and they can do things like gamble legally on the reservations even if they're located in places where it's otherwise illegal. It's a bit like a different country, but not exactly. And it's obviously not secret, like the wizarding world...."

"I see," he said, not seeing at all, but finding that she was standing very close to him. "Erm--is there anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes. I left it in the kitchen. Come on down...."

They managed to pry Draco away from the television (old episodes of *Dallas*--Draco wouldn't stop going on about how he liked J.R. Ewing) and Alicia sat with them at the kitchen table, watching them eat right out of the plastic tubs she had surreptitiously removed from her parents' fridge. Harry opened one at random and found yellow rice with a slight scent of saffron and cumin. She heated it up in a microwave and handed it back to him; the plastic was rather hot now, and he avoided touching it as he ate. Draco opened a tub and found some chicken, which he immediately started to eat cold; Harry couldn't believe how ravenous they both were,

but then he realized that the seder was Monday night, and it was now Saturday.

There was also some salad and she'd brought a large crusty loaf of bread as well. Harry ate his fill, as did Draco; soon after, he felt like his eyelids were incredibly heavy and he just wanted to put his head down....

Alicia led the two of them upstairs to the bedroom. There was a very large bed and a luxuriously thick carpet on the floor. "You two can sleep in here, I'll just kip on the couch...."

"No," Harry said immediately, feeling awful. "We can't kick you out of your own bed. We'll sleep downstairs...."

"But it's a big bed. And there's only one couch."

"No," Harry said again, firmly. "This is your house." Alicia looked thoughtful now.

"So you're saying I *have* to sleep in my own bed."

"Right."

"Very well. One of you can share with me and one of you can sleep on the couch."

Draco and Harry looked uncertainly at each other. Was she suggesting--

"No," she said immediately, noticing the looks they were exchanging. "We're all going to be *sleeping*." And yet, she looked a little unsure of that.

"Draco," Harry said suddenly. "Why don't you take the bed with Alicia and I'll just use some blankets on the floor next to the bed, all right?" This put him somewhat in the role of a chaperone, but it seemed like the best solution.

"And then tomorrow, you can have the bed and Draco the floor," she said, smiling at him. He nodded feebly. She fetched pajamas for them from the supply of former-boyfriend clothes and they changed while she was in the bathroom. They both found it awkward, but at least Harry didn't have to worry about a shirt, since he slept without one.

When Alicia returned from the bath, she was wearing a knee-length black T-shirt and yawning profusely. She stopped when she saw Harry, walking over to him slowly. Harry held his breath. "What's that?" she wanted to know, pointing at the basilisk amulet.

Harry looked down; he'd hardly touched it since Ginny died, since he'd left Azkaban. It was four weeks since he'd escaped. "A basilisk," he said simply. "The king of snakes." She nodded and reached out her hand to touch it tentatively; he felt her fingers brush his skin and he shivered. At length, he stepped away from her. "I'm rather tired. I think I'll go to sleep now." She nodded and swallowed, then began to turn down the bed in a brisk fashion. She was on the side of the bed farthest from Harry, who could see Draco's hand hanging off the side of the mattress when he looked up in the moonlight. Draco had given him a sly grin just before Alicia had turned off the light, as though he might not let a chaperone ruin his first chance to be in a bed with a girl for a long time. What bothered him about this Harry couldn't pinpoint. Perhaps he was a little attracted to Alicia? He *had* let himself give in to her kiss temporarily, in his other life, but he'd been fine when she'd gone to the ceilidh with Draco. Maybe it was because it seemed just a little like Draco was being unfaithful to Jamie. But Jamie was dead. It wasn't possible, strictly speaking, for Draco to be unfaithful to her....

Harry tried not to think about it as he put his head down and closed his eyes; instead he thought about Ginny, and the last time he'd seen her, and when he finally dozed off, he imagined that he was holding her in his arms once more...

* * * * *

He awoke at dawn to sounds of thrashing on the bed. *Oh, no,* he thought. *Don't tell me they're actually--*

"*Jamie--*"

Good heavens, he thought. *He's calling her Jamie.* He remembered Ron and Parvati and wondered how long it would take Alicia to throw them out or report them to the authorities if Draco was calling her Jamie while they had sex.

"*Jamie, I understand, your mum has just died, don't worry, I love you, I'll always love you--*"

Harry sat up, suddenly very awake, realizing that Draco was not. Harry stood so he could see the two of them on the bed. They *had* gotten rather cozy during the night. Draco had rolled onto his back and Alicia had crawled close to him, her right hand thrown over his chest, his left hand on her waist. But they were both fully clothed and fast asleep. Harry thought about what he'd heard. *Did Draco sleep with Jamie or not?* he wondered. He rose and, after using the bathroom, padded quietly downstairs, knowing he wouldn't be able to drop off to sleep again. He thought about turning on the television, but instead he went to the stereo, sorting through her collection of cassette tapes for anything interesting. It was all pop music, except for some film soundtracks. He inserted one of

these and pressed the play button, sitting back to let the symphonic strains wash over him, thinking of Ginny, and his mother and sister and brother....Then he turned the music off and sat in the stillness, and closing his eyes, he began softly to sing the *Kaddish* Ruth had taught him....

"Yis'ga'dal v'yis'kodash sh'may ra'bbo, b'olmo dee'vro chir'usay v'yamlich malchu'say..."

He remembered his sister putting her head on his lap when Remus was taken away...

"...b'chayaychon uv'yomay'chon uv'chayay d'chol bais Yisroel, ba'agolo u'viz'man koriv; v'imru Omein..."

He remembered his little brothers pulling pranks, the identical mischievous grins, part Severus Snape and part Lily Evans....

"...Y'hay shmay rabbo m'vorach l'olam ul'olmay olmayo. Yisborach v'yishtabach v'yispoar v'yisromam v'yismasay..."

He remembered meeting Ginny at the Quidditch World Cup, and kissing her behind Hagrid's old hut...

"...v'yishador v'yis'aleh v'yisalal, shmay d'kudsho, brich hu, l'aylo min kl birchoso v'sheerozo, tush'bechoso v'nechemoso, da, ameeran b'olmo; vimru Omein..."

He remembered holding his mother as she cried, telling her that he loved her, and seeing her crumpled lifeless body on the cave floor....

"...Y'hay shlomo rabbo min sh'mayo, v'chayim alaynu v'al kol Yisroel; v'imru Omein..."

He remembered carrying his brother's coffin on his shoulder, and Dudley's coffin, and carrying Cedric's body back to Hogwarts....

"...Oseh sholom bimromov, hu ya'aseh sholom olaynu, v'al kol yisroel; vimru Omein."

He repeated some of the words when he was done: "Y'hay shlomo rabbo min sh'mayo, v'chayim..." *May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us...*

Peace. Life.

He had to do what he could to assure peace. To limit the loss of life. He had to. There was so much more at stake than his little life, or even the lives of those he held dear. It wasn't just about him any more....

He frowned; there was an odd sound coming from the upstairs, from the bedroom. He walked up the stairs, not realizing what the sound was until he was right outside the slightly-ajar door.

Bedsprings.

Damn, Draco! he thought. He couldn't even--

"Stop it, Alicia. Please."

Harry froze; did *Draco Malfoy* just ask a girl to stop doing something? *In bed?*

"You can't pretend you weren't enjoying that..."

"Alicia! I--I can't help it if my body just--just responds naturally to you. I'm only human. But--but all I can think of is Jamie...."

Harry saw through the crack that she was kneeling in front of him, and she'd removed her nightshirt. The sheets were bunched around her hips. At the name "Jamie" she threw herself down on her back, a pouty expression on her face. Harry glimpsed her chest for a moment, catching his breath, then backed up guiltily so he couldn't see her.

He heard her sigh. "I should have known. All the cute ones are. Does that mean Harry is too? And who's this Jamie fellow? Ex-boyfriend?"

"No, no," Draco said hastily. "Ex-girlfriend. Harry's sister, in fact."

"Ooooh," she said with understanding.

"Actually--not ex-girlfriend, not really. Late girlfriend."

"Oh," she said more tersely this time. "You mean--"

"Yes. About a month ago."

"Gah. I'm so sorry. I had no idea..."

"I know you didn't. I'm just not--not ready to move on, really...."

Harry heard them moving, and when he took another peek through the crack, she had moved to pillow her head on Draco and had her arms around him. She still wasn't wearing anything from the waist up, though.

"I know, I know, love," she said softly. "Sssh...it's okay..." They lay quietly for a few minutes, then Alicia spoke again. "Did you two, er, you know..."

"Sleep together?" He sighed. "We were going to. Had it all planned. It was going to be on her birthday. I had to convince her to wait; she'd have attacked me sooner if I'd have let her..."

Harry heard Alicia giggle. "I can't blame her...."

"Stop that! Hey, watch the hand..." Harry remembered with irony the scene behind Hagrid's hut on Ginny's fifteenth birthday. *We've talked about the hands, Draco....*

"Anyway--" she prompted him.

"Anyway, unfortunately, her birthday was also the day her mum died. We met just as we'd planned, late at night, and went up to the old Muggle Studies classroom..."

"What studies?"

"Muggle."

"Oh, right. Go on."

"But even though we were, er, naked and well--doing stuff, we just couldn't--we didn't--"

"I understand."

"I mean, her mum was dead and her brother had been taken into custody by the Ministry of Magic. It really didn't seem to be a good time for shagging, you know? So we dressed again and I just held her while she cried...."

"So you never--"

--and we never really had another opportunity after that. Before she died. Before she was killed, I should say. You know she died to save her brother?"

"You mean Harry?"

"No; when she was killed he was in prison. Her younger brother. She just stepped in front of him and took the curse...." His voice hitched, and Harry felt his eyes water, thinking of his sister's bravery and sacrifice. *That was Jamie*, he thought. As much as she talked about how annoying the twins were, she'd sung like an angel at Stuart's funeral and defended Simon's life with her own....*That was just what you did*. What Jamie did, anyway. That's who she was, he thought.

He heard the covers being thrown back on the bed as Draco rose. "I'd better get up. Can't languish all day in bed with a beautiful half-naked girl, as appealing as that sounds..."

Harry slipped back down the stairs and went to the kitchen to see whether Alicia had brought back any breakfast cereal. He didn't find anything in the fridge, but a tall cupboard there were some boxes of cereal. He found a bowl and poured himself some corn flakes, starting to spoon it into his mouth just as Alicia and Draco entered, Draco on crutches.

"I found those in the wardrobe upstairs. I'd forgotten that Rodney had left them here after he'd recovered from his kneecap surgery...." Harry momentarily wondered how many boyfriends ago Rodney was, but he didn't ask. He might get an answer.

Alicia was wearing jeans again today with a tight light blue T-shirt that seemed to be all she wore from the waist up. Harry looked away from her, remembering seeing her upstairs. *I wonder how I'll fare trying to sleep in the same bed with her*, he wondered, wishing they'd both been cads and had gone along with her original idea to give them the bedroom while she slept on the couch.

When they'd finished eating breakfast, she invited them to come to the stables with her. They went back out to her Range Rover and she drove across the estate along a dirt road that cut a brown swathe through the rolling green. Harry saw a large stone Georgian house in the distance, but it seemed a world away, and he knew that was how Alicia liked her relationship with her parents: it had some distance.

Alicia took them to see Granny's Ghost, a beautiful dappled grey mare with soulful eyes and a mouth that tickled when Harry held out some sugar cubes for her. Alicia took out a currying brush and began to work on the grey's flanks.

"The grooms will do it as well, but I like the rhythm of it," she explained, smiling as she brushed the quivering flanks. Draco was standing at the door to the next box.

"Here's a beauty..." he breathed, and Harry looked up to see a majestic chestnut stallion with a white lightening bolt on its brow. He was jolted momentarily.

"That's Magic Man," she said smiling. "My old horse. Funny, isn't it? I named him when I was quite young. He does stud service now." For some reason, Harry felt himself flushing. Draco patted his nose and gave the chestnut some sugar cubes. There were more horses in the other boxes, but it was Granny's Ghost who was Alicia's focus now. They stayed with her, talking about the wizarding world while she groomed the horse and spoke lovingly to her. They watched her exercise the mare a bit and

afterward they returned to the lodge house for lunch, finishing the food she'd nicked from her parents' kitchen the night before.

"Cook will start to notice soon if there aren't any leftovers in the fridge," Alicia cautioned them. Harry was startled; her parents had servants. With a house that size? Of course they did. "I'd best do a trip to buy groceries. What sort of food do you like?" Harry and Draco looked at each other; after Monday night's meal, the decision was unanimous.

"Italian," they said together.

"All right, that's not too hard. I can pick up some spaghetti and tomato sauce and a few other things. I'll be back soon."

Harry surprised them both by cooking dinner that night (spaghetti and meatballs--she told her parents she was out on a date) and when it came to be time for bed, just after they'd turned out the lights, he felt Alicia's hand on his shoulder. *Uh-oh*, he thought. *Trouble*.

He tried to ignore the hand. He tried not to think about the way she'd looked in the bed that morning, with Draco....

The hand didn't move, and after what seemed a long time, she withdrew it. But then he heard her soft voice saying, "Harry?" He didn't answer. *Let her think I'm asleep*, he thought. She said his name again and when he still didn't respond, she rolled over and he tried not to heave a great sigh of relief. In the morning, he rose again before the other two, drawing himself a bath and washing carefully, to keep the bandage dry. He found a shirt and some pants in the Old Boyfriend Repository, as he'd mentally named the wardrobe in the corridor, and went down to the kitchen to see about breakfast. He discovered that she'd bought some eggs and bacon for them, and he was touched; he knew she shouldn't eat anything of the sort, so this was clearly for their benefit. He woke the others with the smell of the sizzling bacon, and Draco hobbled into the kitchen on his crutches with his eyes partially closed, following the aroma with a dreamy smile on his face.

"Where's Alicia?"

"In the shower. She said the bacon smelled great, but she didn't want to risk temptation and ordered us to eat all of it before she comes down so there's no chance of her having any."

Harry shrugged. "Well, that's one way to do it..."

He served up the bacon and the scrambled eggs he'd also cooked and they both sat down to eat, shoveling their food in hungrily, not having had hot breakfasts since Hogwarts. When they were almost done, Harry said to Draco, "You never did sleep with Jamie, did you?"

His best friend jerked his head up and looked him in the eye. "No, Harry. But not because you told us we couldn't. Because--"

"She was mourning our mum," he said softly. Draco nodded.

"I wanted to be there for her, to comfort her. If she'd asked me to do *that* to comfort her, I would have. Well, you know what I mean. I would do whatever she asked. Since she asked me to just hold her, that's what I did. It was completely up to her. But a part of me--"

"A part of you wishes you had done it, since she's gone," Harry said quietly, finishing for him. Draco nodded. "And now--" Draco frowned at him.

"Now what?"

"Now--you're not ready to move on yet." Draco still stared at him. "With Alicia." No response. "Um, I saw the two of you yesterday morning..."

"Ooooh!" Draco finally responded, slapping his forehead. "Yes, yes....Well, she didn't know. Evidently *your* girlfriend let something, er, slip about my reputation when we were down in London for the concert..."

It was Harry's turn now. "Oh," he said simply, as though he'd been the one to tell. "Well, she seems to understand now. I just pretended to be asleep last night and I got up early this morning. I mean, she's very pretty and all, but I'm just not ready for anything new either...."

Draco smirked. "You could have fooled me. The way you and Ruth were--"

"She was teaching me a song!" he protested, but he felt himself flush. When Alicia walked into the kitchen, their conversation ground to an abrupt halt, and Harry was glad she hadn't entered a few minutes earlier.

On Wednesday, Harry grew his hair and beard again since he would be leaving the confines of the Spinnet estate. Alicia wanted them to come see her ride Granny's Ghost, and Harry had to admit that it seemed unlikely that there could be any risk in their attending. There would be huge crowds of people there to watch and bet on the races, and the likelihood of any of them being either Death Eaters or Aurors seemed slim.

Alicia's parents were lurching at their club and sitting with their friends to watch the races. Harry, Draco and Alicia climbed into her Range Rover and followed the groom who was driving the horse trailer out onto the main road toward Towcester. Since the trailer was right in front of them, they could look into the soulful eyes of Granny's Ghost the whole way to the racecourse. The drive only took about half an hour. Draco sat in the back seat with his leg up. Harry was glad for once that it was his right wrist he'd sprained, as this meant his left hand was free to clutch the door of

the car as Alicia careened left onto Park View from Overstone Lane. He didn't mind as much when they had to turn right onto Wellingborough Road from Raglan Street, as his left side simply slammed into the door (he had made quite sure he'd locked it securely). Even though he was wearing a seat belt, he still felt like he was likely to wind up in Alicia's lap whenever she turned left, and he was afraid she just might take that the wrong way.

Finally, they arrived at Towcester Racecourse. It seemed that the entire county of Northamptonshire had turned out; Harry saw people frantically counting money and staring at racing forms, trying to figure out how to make themselves rich. As they followed Alicia to the horse trailer, Draco whispered to Harry, "How much Muggle money--I mean, money--have we got left?"

"Sixteen pounds eleven p." They'd been very frugal. Draco looked around at the hustle and bustle of the racecourse. "We should bet it. All of it. It wouldn't be risky. We could, you know, *guarantee* that our horse would win. We could pick a real long shot and--"

"No," Harry said adamantly.

"Just like that? No, without any discussion or--"

"No. We can't fix a race." Harry looked at the groom; he thought he might have heard the words *fix a race*, and Harry realized that was the last thing anyone should be heard saying at a racecourse. "We're not betting the rest of the money," he said quietly but firmly.

"Oh, it's all right for you to cheat at golf, but I can't suggest--"

"That wasn't illegal!" Harry hissed at him. "What you're suggesting *is*. That was just a private game between two people. This is regulated. There are all kinds of safeguards against cheating. Do you know how much is at stake here? How much money people bet on races?"

"And how much they win?"

"And how much they *lose*?" Harry reminded him. "We're just here for Alicia and to have a chance to relax at the races before she drives us down to London the day after tomorrow. *No betting*. And no--that other thing you suggested. That's that." Harry looked at the groom nervously, but he seemed occupied tending to Granny's Ghost. Alicia had gone off to change into her silks. When she returned, she was resplendent in bright red with a black and yellow harlequin pattern on the left half of her shirt and the opposite leg of her knee-length trousers, which disappeared into tall black shining boots. Her hair was pulled back into a very small ponytail, and she carried her helmet, looking exhilarated. She had been weighed already, and she walked up to the grey, talking softly to the

horse and letting her nuzzle her palm, then patting her sides affectionately. Harry smiled at her.

"What are the odds on Granny's ghost?" he asked her. She looked around.

"I'm not sure....You there. Can I see your form?" She accosted a passing young man who was looking at her very appreciatively. He handed her his racing form without question. Alicia scanned down the closely-printed listings, muttering, "*Granny's Ghost, Granny's Ghost....Ah, here we are. Granny's Ghost* in the fourth....nineteen to one."

She sounded a bit dispirited when she read that. Harry took the form from her. "That's--that's not too bad. Look at this; plenty of horses have got longer odds than that. Amanda Lou is thirty-five to one and Spencerian is fifty to one, in the same race." Alicia didn't look cheered by this information. The favorite in the fourth race was Alpha Omega. Just as he read this, Harry looked up and saw a trailer unloading a beautiful black stallion with white around its hooves and a white blaze from its nose to its forelock. The groom patting the horse's shining flank was saying, "That's it, Alphie, there's my boy, you're going to show them how to do it, aren't you...."

Harry bristled. He looked again at *Granny's Ghost*, at the nervous white-rimmed eyes and dappled grey coat, the anxious prancing hooves. For a moment he had an urge to fix the race to do something to put Alpha Omega in his place--last place. But the moment passed, and he and Draco wished Alicia luck and went up into the stands with the other spectators. Harry made sure he put his hand in his pocket frequently, to check that the sixteen pounds was still there. That would be a pitifully small bet anyway, he thought, when it did momentarily occur to him to bet it on one of the favorites (but not Alpha Omega).

It was very exciting to watch the races. In spite of the fact that they weren't betting, they managed to get hold of some abandoned racing forms and picked their own favorites for each race. In the third race, the horse Harry picked to place actually came in second, so he was very pleased with himself. Then Alicia was moving toward the starting gate on *Granny's Ghost*, and Harry crossed his fingers for her. The race began and the horses were all straining to get out of the gate, stretching out their necks and pounding the earth with their frightfully hard hooves, jockeys leaning forward, imperceptibly nudging or caressing their animals, pulling on the bit, whispering a bit of encouragement in an alert ear....

Harry watched Alicia, growing more and more excited. She seemed to be one with the mare, letting something of her magic, perhaps, flow into the animal. He saw that Alicia let *Granny* have her head and simply followed along, and she passed one horse after the next, until finally, the grey was neck-and-neck with Alpha Omega and Harry and Draco were both yelling madly, beside themselves. At the last, *Granny's Ghost's* neck seemed to

grow another two inches, and as the horses crossed the finish line, it was proclaimed a photo finish. Had she transfigured the horse, ever so slightly? he wondered. Would it show up as accidental magic? He remembered Hermione playing the cello, her hand stretching. That hadn't brought any Ministry types running, but then, that was more like the Animagus transfiguration, and as Dumbledore noted, if the Ministry could detect that, there wouldn't be any unregistered Animagi.

In a few minutes, the verdict came in: Granny's Ghost had won and Alpha Omega had placed. A horse called Kitchen Kapers came in third. Harry could see that Alicia was exultant, punching the air with her fist, and when the groom lifted her down from the saddle, she threw her arms around him. Harry and Draco made their way down to her (it was awkward for Draco, with the crutches), and she told a security guard to let them through. They enveloped her with hugs, and Harry's face hurt with smiling so much. It was nice to know he *could* still smile this much. He'd never seen anything so thrilling.

Then suddenly, amid the flashbulbs recording the upset win of Granny's Ghost, the world was full of flapping wings and feathers, and the mare was rearing up on her hind legs, whinnying like mad; it was all the groom could do to hold her in check. An eagle owl had landed on Draco's shoulder, a parchment tied to its leg. Harry tried to untie it with just his left hand, but he couldn't do it, and Draco was trying to hold onto his crutches. Alicia dashed over to help after seeing that the groom had the mare under control.

"What's going on? Why is that owl on your shoulder?"

"Well," Harry hesitated, "I don't know if this came up when we were all talking after the concert, but we use post owls to deliver letters and things...."

"We?" She looked baffled, then the revelation hit her. "Oh! We. Right. I think Hermione mentioned that. Do you need help?" Harry nodded.

Alicia tentatively approached the owl and untied the parchment. As soon as it was free of its burden, the bird dug its talons painfully into Draco's shoulder and took off, a number of people in the crowd pointing at the unusual sight of an owl flying about in the daytime. Alicia looked at Draco. "It has your name on it," she said, handing it to him. Draco unrolled it with one hand and Harry held the edge with his left hand and read it with him silently. Draco did not protest.

Draco,

Why have you neglected your correspondence to me these last four weeks? I have had to find out from Zabini what you have been up to. While it seems your academic performance is

adequate, he says you have not been sleeping in the Slytherin dormitory at night. Please explain this. I understand you are still without a head of house as Professor Snape has taken a leave of absence. This is no excuse for flouting the rules; you are to be in your dormitory bed every night. Zabini has also told me that Sirius Black is teaching Dark Arts and the headmistress has returned to teaching Transfiguration.

It is true that Severus Snape has suffered some recent personal tragedies, but what has that headmistress done to replace him and his late wife? Nothing. And yet you do not write to me to tell me what is going on, even though you have fewer classes than you were accustomed to. I cannot believe she has Black teaching Dark Arts. Is she mad? He's an ignorant fool. Zabini tells me that Potions and History of Magic classes have been cancelled for a month, with no excuse given for Professor Binns' absence, and that your Care of Magical Creatures teacher is also on a leave of absence. Leave of absence! I declare that the headmistress has taken leave of her senses! That school is falling apart. And they want to admit Muggle-borns!

I am taking you out of that excuse for a school as soon as possible. I am friends with the headmaster of Durmstrang. He has assured me that he would be happy to take you for the last two months of the term, and that he has heard from a number of other Hogwarts parents as well--not all of them in Slytherin--so you will have the company of other former Hogwarts students and other young witches and wizards from Britain.

I am asking the chair to call an emergency meeting of the board tomorrow concerning this travesty, and I will likely resign. I will be coming to the school on Friday to officially withdraw you as a student. We can travel to Durmstrang over the weekend and get you officially enrolled, so that you can begin proper classes again on Monday.

Regards,

Father

Draco looked up at Harry, horrified. "I forgot to tell Dumbledore to write to my dad pretending to be me. He hasn't gotten a letter in about a month." His voice was soft and frightened.

"And how can your dad take you to Durmstrang when that's not really you, that's Dumbledore?" Harry said *sotto voce*.

Draco looked up into the sky. "The damn bird is gone, isn't it? Bugger! We need to send this on to Dumbledore so he knows my dad is coming! We need a post owl!"

Harry shook his head. "We don't have a post owl--" he started to say; then he thought of Sebastian. He turned frantically to Alicia, who looked mystified about the entire affair. "Alicia, do you have Hermione's phone number?"

"Yes. She gave it to me when she contacted me about the concert she gave in London. Why?"

Harry felt very grim, after the jubilation of Alicia's and Granny's win. "We need her to send us her owl."

"Her what?"

"It's a long story...."

* * * * *

They were able to tell Alicia the long story in the Range Rover on the way back to her house. "We don't have much time," Harry said. "We need Sebastian to get here, then we need to draft a letter to Dumbledore and send the letter on from Draco's dad along with our letter to him. And we have to hope that Sebastian gets to Hogwarts in time, so Dumbledore knows not to Polyjuice into Draco, because if he does, Mr. Malfoy's going to drag him off to Durmstrang, and whenever the potion wears off, he's suddenly going to find himself talking to the former headmaster of Hogwarts instead of his son."

"And," Draco added, "we have to hope that the owl doesn't deliver it to him at a time when he's being *me*, or if it does, that no one notices that it says 'Albus Dumbledore' on it instead of 'Draco Malfoy'..."

Harry turned and gave him a horrified look. "We can't send owl post to Dumbledore!" he realized suddenly. "Even if he's looking like Davy White, if someone sees him receive something that has his real name on it, that could be very dangerous for him!" Harry furrowed his brow, wondering when Dumbledore had received his owl post about the Invisibility Cloak. That didn't seem to cause a problem; the owl might have come to him when no one else was around. But now the former headmaster was spending a portion of every day as the caretaker, and a portion as a sixth-year Slytherin, so it was going to be much more complicated to contact him. It was also *very important* that they contact him, before Lucius Malfoy came to take his "son" to Durmstrang.

"Well," Draco said, "at least he won't have to pretend to be me any more. He can just stop taking the potion, it will look like I've disappeared, and

they can occupy themselves searching all over Aberdeenshire for me while I'm down in London." He looked a little smug about this.

"Yes," Harry said, "but now it will look more conspicuous for us to be traveling together, because you'll also be missing from the school." Draco was silent at that. Alicia turned into the drive leading to her lodge house and Harry slammed against the car door painfully. He wanted to rub his painful left shoulder, but he couldn't reach it with his right hand with his arm in the sling.

When they reached the house, Alicia rang up Hermione, then handed the telephone to Harry, who was about to speak into it when he realized that Hermione probably still thought he was a murderer, having heard about his escape on the Muggle news. He thrust the phone back at Alicia. "Don't mention me," he whispered. "I think I need to explain my situation to her in person. Just ask her to send the owl."

Alicia did just that; Harry could vaguely hear Hermione's perplexed voice on the other end of the line, but finally she seemed to agree, and Alicia hung up.

"Why wouldn't you let me tell her?"

"What if she hung up and didn't wait for an explanation? What if she just called the Muggle police and told them I'm holding you hostage here or something? I think this is the sort of thing that needs to be explained in person. If someone had told you over the telephone that you were a witch, would you have believed them?"

Alicia admitted that this was unlikely. She told her parents she had a date again and she drove into Kettering to get some Indian food for their supper. While Draco was scouring the inside of a container that had held Tandoori chicken, trying to get every last morsel, a large owl came flapping in the kitchen window they'd left open for him. Harry recognized Sebastian, and breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't sure how quickly the owl would be able to get to Alicia's from London.

They composed a brief letter to Dumbledore, saying basically that Lucius Malfoy's letter would explain the problem, and then they composed a letter to Professor McGonagall, asking her to pass both letters on to Davy White.

"Do you think we can we trust her?" Draco asked. Harry remembered that in this life she had only been the headmistress of the school, while for Harry, she had been his head of house and someone who had worked with him closely every night for months on end to train him to be an Animagus.

"She knows Dumbledore is Davy. And she prides herself on not being nosy; she would never read a letter addressed to someone else. We can

safely send the owl to McGonagall and trust that she'll give the other letters to Dumbledore."

That was good enough for Draco. Harry had been relieved to see that since the Seder, he had been much more like his old self. He suspected it was because he wasn't writing in the diary as much. They sent the owl off with his burden after giving him some food, so he wouldn't have to spend a lot of time hunting on the way to Scotland. Harry watched Sebastian go with a lump in his throat, hoping he would be in time...

* * * *

They were preparing to go to London on Friday morning when Sebastian returned. The letter was addressed to Alicia Spinnet, as per the instructions in the letter they'd sent Dumbledore. However, Alicia took one look at it and handed it to Harry.

I have ceased using the potion and DM is now considered to be missing. I still have some of the hair, so I may still use the potion to give some people a merry chase, perhaps somewhere near the west coast or even in Ireland. Please do not take any unnecessary risks. I understand that you had good reasons for contacting the person to whom this has been sent, but doing so was still risky. Use extreme caution at all times. I will do my best to assure that Mr. M is quite far from you. Thank you for warning me of his imminent arrival.

D

Harry sighed. "That's something," he said, handing it to Draco, who smiled when he read it. "Ireland! Dad'll be miserable if he goes looking himself. Whenever he's been, he says he can't understand a word anyone says."

Harry frowned. "It's not hard to understand someone Irish."

Draco gave him a lopsided smile. "My dad is as anti-Irish as they come, Harry. They could all use perfect British diction and it wouldn't matter to him." He looked again as though he had a very amusing picture in his head of his father looking for him in Ireland. "I almost wish I were in Ireland now, so I could see my dad's face...."

"The last thing I want to see is your dad's face. No offense."

Draco shrugged. "None taken."

They climbed into the Range Rover, and Harry tightened his seat belt, hoping that he could take Alicia's driving all the way to London. It only took them about twenty minutes to reach the London Road, and about an hour after that they reached Craven Park Road. Harry's side was aching

and he almost wished he'd sprained his ankle instead of his wrist so he could have been sitting with his leg up in the back seat.

In only another fifteen minutes they were turning onto Fulham Palace Road, and then Wardo Avenue and Hermione's building. Harry turned to Alicia, unsure of what to say. She'd been much more subdued at night when it had been his turn to use the bed, and when he had awoken to find her with her head on his chest and one arm across him, he didn't have the heart to push her away, but closed his eyes and held her, remembering the simple comfort of holding Hermione in his dorm before their relationship had become much more physical. Perhaps that was why Alicia had had so many boyfriends, he thought; she just didn't like sleeping alone. Once she'd discovered they weren't interested in anything other than *actual* sleep, she'd been fine with it. Harry worried about her momentarily; would she flee the country if there was war? He tried not to think about the many lives that would be disrupted by this, and reminded himself that he needed to fix the timeline so that none of this would ever have happened.

"Goodbye, Alicia. Thank you for everything."

She smiled and nodded, but her eyes were wet. Harry leaned over and kissed her cheek, and then opened the door. She got out too and came around to help Draco emerge from the back seat, handing him his crutches.

"These are yours," he said. "Don't you want them back?"

"You're the one who needs them right now, not me. Just--just take them--"

Draco looked at Harry, at a loss for how to handle this, but then Alicia threw her arms around Draco, and he staggered slightly, and Harry saw him wince from putting his weight on his bad ankle. Then she extracted herself from him and quickly swiped at her eyes. "I should go. Meeting people for lunch. Take care, both of you." She quickly climbed back in the Range Rover and drove off without looking back. Harry and Draco looked at each other; Harry had grown his hair and beard again since he was in public, and they turned to Hermione's building now.

"What if she's not home?" Draco said uncertainly.

Harry shrugged. "We take that chance. Hopefully she is. I'll stand out of the way; you buzz her flat and ask her to let you in. She presses a button that lets you open the door down here. We'll both go in, and on the stairs, I'll put on the Invisibility Cloak. I'll follow you into the flat. Once we're both in, I'll check to find out whether her teacher is there. If the three of us are alone, I'll take off the cloak and we can explain what's going on."

Draco nodded, looking like he hoped Harry wouldn't ask him to repeat the plan to him. Harry heard Hermione's surprised voice when Draco pressed the button for her flat, and they both dashed into the building when they heard the click that meant the outer door was unlocked. On the stairs Harry donned the Invisibility Cloak and when Draco knocked on the door to the flat, Harry got quite a shock.

In some ways, she looked more than ever like the old Hermione he remembered and not very much at all like the frighteningly self-possessed cellist who had performed at the British Library. Her hair was wild, barely held in check by the ponytail into which it was pulled. She was wearing a loose-fitting grey T-shirt spattered with paint and denim shorts that had clearly been jeans in a previous incarnation. She was in her bare feet, which were also paint spattered, and there was a smudge of white on her nose. Her eyes were very bright, as though she'd been crying, and Harry wondered what on earth was going on.

He followed Draco into the flat, noting that the entire place reeked of paint, and it was easy to see why; dropcloths covered all of the furniture and there was a very tall ladder with a can of paint hanging from it in the middle of the room.

When she had closed the door, she walked silently back to the living room, her arms crossed, and then turned and stared at Draco, looking suspicious. "What are you doing here?" she finally said. "Shouldn't you be at school? That damn school that doesn't want us..." It took Harry a moment, but then he realized that "us" referred to the Muggle-born witches and wizards. Draco looked down at his ankle.

"I've had a little accident while traveling, and I was wondering whether you could put me up for a little bit, until I'm fit again?"

She softened upon seeing this, but then she said, "I don't know. If I sit you in a chair, can you make yourself useful?"

"Useful?"

She waved her arms at the painting gear. "Edith and I are getting out. We're both going to America. I have a chance to be the cellist in a quartet of friends from Curtis and she's got multiple offers she's considering from three different conservatories. I'm sixteen and out of school and I'm damned if I'm going into the royal army because the idiots over in Whitehall are sending amateurs to Finland. If it was a cause I believed in, that would be one thing. But this is just ridiculous, and I refuse to be roped in."

She suddenly sounded very American to Harry, and he remembered that she had sounded that way from time to time the first day he'd met her at

the library. Perhaps if she did move back to America, she'd lose her accent after a while.

"So you're painting the flat because..."

"Because we already painted the flat."

Draco looked perplexed. "So you're painting it again?"

"We weren't ever *supposed* to paint it. The landlord never knew. We're painting it white again because that's what it used to be, and if we don't, we stand to lose a lot of money."

"But," Draco said, "isn't the paint costing you a good bit? And all the gear?"

"Not as much as if we *don't*."

"Oh." He paused and looked around at the incomplete painting job. "So," he went on, trying to sound casual. "The two of you are painting the flat...."

Hermione sighed. "Nope. Just me. Edith did some, before she flew off to Boston. She's interviewing there. She did the bedrooms and bathroom, so at least I no longer have to sleep and shower with this stench in my nostrils all the time. I'm handling the public rooms. But since *you're* here now, if you wouldn't mind helping with a little *magic*..."

Draco smiled nervously. "Right. Well--I don't really, er, know any painting spells. But if you want an extra hand or two--"

--or three," Harry said, taking off the cloak.

--we're happy to oblige," Draco finished.

Hermione screamed and dove for the telephone.

Chapter Seventeen

The Wand

Just as Hermione lunged for the telephone, Draco lunged for Hermione, and Harry tried to separate the two of them and claim the telephone at the same time, using his left hand, which slipped and missed. Draco didn't miss, having abandoned his crutches so he had both hands free (he was hopping on his good leg), but Hermione had already started pounding on the "9." Harry grunted with the effort and managed to knock the telephone out of her hands with his elbow; it went flying into a paint pan

with a wet roller in it. Luckily, there was actually just a thin film of paint in the pan.

Hermione tried to lunge for it again, but Harry grabbed her around the waist and took her down, then howled at the pain it caused his wrist. Just then he noticed that Draco was rolling on the floor, his crutches rather far from him, holding his crotch. Hermione's foot was in close proximity to it still. His mouth was open in a silent scream, his eyes round and horrified, and Harry made a mental note that she was willing to do whatever it took, so he decided he was too.

He concentrated, trying to convince himself that he wasn't feeling radiating pain from his not-quite-healed wrist, and when his paws landed on the drop cloth and he shook his mane out, Hermione was the one with the horrified look on her face. He ambled toward her with that rolling, casual lion's gait, then lifted his right front paw to swipe the phone out of the paint pan; he nosed it over to Draco, who heard someone on the other end frantically saying, "*Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? Please, do you require assistance?*"

Draco leaned over a trifle awkwardly and spoke into it, saying, "No, sorry, but thanks for asking." He punched the button to hang it up with a look of intense satisfaction on his face, followed by a glare of intense hatred directed at Hermione. Harry turned to her; she was still paralyzed by shock and fear, staring at him, and he decided that this wasn't helping his case any, so he transfigured back into his human form.

As soon as he did, the pressure his body weight was placing on his wrist made him cry out, and he collapsed on the floor, panting, realizing too late that he'd landed on a spill of wet paint, which now ornamented his pants, shirt and his right cheek and part of the right lens of his glasses. In fact, he noticed now, all of them were liberally spattered with paint after the tussle with the phone. Hermione had been already, but now she was even more so. Draco's crutches were paint-spattered as well. Harry sat up with some effort, realizing too late that he was sitting in more wet paint (which was, after all, the purpose of drop cloths) and he groaned at this.

"Hermione, give me a moment to explain...."

"*Explain?*" she squeaked, finding her voice. "Explain that you're an escaped murderer? I trusted you! I let you into my *home*. You can explain to Scotland Yard!"

"Will you be quiet, you bleeding cow?" Draco yelled at her. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about, so just shut it and listen!"

Harry leaped to her defense from pure reflex. "Listen, Malfoy, you can't talk to her like--"

"Oh, I don't want to hear it Harry. So you knew her in your other life. So she was a good shag. I don't give a damn; she's going to be quiet and listen if I have to put my fist in her mouth while she does."

"How did you know that?" Harry demanded. "I never told you that!" A second later, he clamped his mouth shut, looking guiltily at Hermione; he'd as much as admitted the truth of the statement.

Now Hermione was livid. "*What?*" she shrieked again, turning to Harry. "When did we ever shag? What other life? Tell me why I shouldn't run to the window and scream for the police this very second?" Harry glanced up; the window was already open for ventilation of the paint fumes.

He tried to calm himself. "We're trying to stop the war," he explained, hoping he sounded a lot saner and more reasonable to her than he did to himself. "Draco didn't mean anything by what he said; he was just trying to get you hacked off--"

"Don't make excuses for me--" Draco started to say, but Hermione cut him off.

"Well it bloody well worked!" she exclaimed, standing and brushing herself off. "And what about the escaped murderer part?"

"Well--technically I did get sent to wizarding prison for accidentally killing my mother. She was trying to put the killing curse on Ron Weasley--"

"The tall red-haired boy? He was a prat, but if everyone who's a prat deserved to die for it, the world would have a population of about ten people. And it wouldn't include me."

"Yes, well, *why* she was trying to kill him is an even longer story I won't go into right now. At any rate, I stopped her by disarming her. When she went flying backwards...." He had to stop; suddenly he felt like he couldn't swallow. "We were in a cave, see," he explained with some difficulty. "And her head...she hit it on this outcropping of rock..." He couldn't go on, turning from her so she couldn't see his face. He felt her soften and approach him; her hand was on his arm.

"I'm--I'm sorry. Didn't they see it as self-defense?"

"Harry's spell caused her death," Draco said, his voice hard. "That's the only thing that matters to them. They only gave him five years, but he was still convicted."

Harry composed himself and turned to face her. "While I was in prison, a teacher at the school who was one of Voldemort's followers killed my sister and my girlfriend and he destroyed my little brother's mind; he's twelve and insane, locked up in a wizarding hospital. My stepfather and

Ron's brother Charlie--you met him, didn't you? At the concert?--they're both professors, and now they're also running for their lives. A week ago we felt our Dark Marks activate...." Harry pulled up his sleeve so she could see it; "...which meant Voldemort was summoning his followers. He recruited us because our parents promised us to him when we were babies, but we've been working as spies. That's why my mother tried to kill Ron; I was the one told to kill him, and I didn't do it, so my brother was kidnapped--to 'convince' me--and then he died. My mother was afraid my other brother or my sister would be targeted next if I didn't do as I was told. And there's also the Obedience Charm to contend with...."

"Obedience Charm?" Hermione and Draco said together. Harry furrowed his brow, looking at Draco.

"Weren't you in the cave when Mum told me about that?" Draco shook his head dumbly. "Oh, that's right--you ran for help." Harry thought for a moment; he should have told Draco about this. *He* must have the charm on him as well. "It's this charm Voldemort put on me when I was a baby--he probably put it on you too, Draco. I wish I'd remembered to tell you. Anything he tells either one of us to do outright--a direct order--if we refuse to do it, we drop down dead. And if we agree--then we *will* do whatever it is, if it is at all possible. That's the other reason why Mum was trying to kill Ron in my place; I'd received the order to kill him second-hand. She was afraid that if he told me to do it himself--if it was a direct order--I'd refuse and die. So she was trying to prevent my death as well. If Voldemort ordered me to kill someone who was already dead, I couldn't possibly do it, so there'd be no consequence of my either agreeing or refusing."

"You weren't kidding when you said it was a long story. You did, however, say you weren't going to tell it..."

"Sorry. I--"

"*Bloody hell!*" Draco exclaimed suddenly, as though he'd just woken up. "An Obedience Charm! That's why my dad was so anxious to come to us and give us the orders to kill Ginny and Ron--"

"Were you supposed to kill Ginny?" Hermione said, looking horrified.

"Oh, Draco didn't kill her," Harry said quickly. Suddenly he had a lump in his throat and had difficulty speaking. "Remember, I said it was a teacher...."

Hermione put her hand on her chest and sat down on a drop cloth-covered ottoman, shaking her head. "She was so nice. And I was so glad that she was all right after that car hit her....And your sister too? She was very pretty, and so interested in my cello after the concert, wanted me to demonstrate some techniques...."

"They were killed while I was in prison. My sister was Draco's girlfriend, as well. The moment I received the letter, I decided to escape from prison, and soon after, I did. I've been on the run ever since. We have to go to Dover to get--something. And then we have to go to Wales. In Wales we have to do something--something that will hopefully stop this war. When Voldemort summoned his people last Friday night, I think it was either to facilitate the war, which has been stirred up by Voldemort's grandson, or to tighten their search for me. It's not just Aurors who've been looking for me; it's dark wizards too. I might have been safer if I had stayed in Azkaban...."

"In what?"

"That's the name of the wizarding prison. But now that we've learned that the war is all because of Voldemort--"

"But--but how can I believe you? All right--let's just say I want to. Do I have to take you at your word? Is there any proof you can offer? And how would you stop this war anyway?"

Draco looked at him. "Tell her about the time change, Harry. You know you want to."

"No." He glared at Draco, and felt very close to calling him 'Malfoy' again. "There's something better. In a way, you *do* have to take my word for it. But would you rather take the word of Alicia Spinnet and Ruth Pelta? Didn't you wonder why Alicia wanted to borrow Sebastian?"

"Who *still* hasn't come back. One perfectly good owl, gone."

"He'll be back. Don't worry. Give me the phone, Draco." He put his hand out and, hesitating for a moment, Draco gave him the sticky handpiece. Harry in turn gave it to Hermione.

"There's your telephone. Call Alicia or Ruth or both of them and ask them whether you should trust us. We were both feverish--especially Draco--when we reached Manchester, and Ruth brought us some of her great-grandmother's chicken soup; then we went to a Passover seder at her house. And she bought us train tickets. We injured ourselves when we were close to Alicia's--we were heading there anyway, and we'd almost made it. She let us stay at her place for a week getting some rest, and she drove us down here today. We just need to work out a route to Dover, then back here, then out to Wales, that's all. We've come so far and we're so close now...can you help us even a little? We're perfectly harmless, I assure you."

She looked ruefully at him and rubbed her bottom; she must have landed painfully, Harry realized. "I wouldn't say *perfectly* harmless. I mean, you turned into a *lion*...."

"Golden griffin, actually. I didn't spread my wings, so you couldn't tell."

"Wings?"

"Yes. And it hurt like hell to put my weight on my right paw--er, hand. But I'm going to need to, because when we're at Dover, I need to fly over the landscape to find what I'm looking for...."

"What?"

He sighed. "Just call them."

Her mouth had grown very thin. "I don't know. How do I know you haven't put spells on them to make them say nice things about you?"

"Because that would have brought the Ministry of Magic running, that's how. You saw how fast Lockhart and Angelina Johnson showed up at the British Library when I was trying to convince you you're a witch. You know what they can do. As it was, we had to leave the park where we were camped because we did do *one* little spot of magic, and they picked up on it....We've been avoiding magic, so we don't call attention to ourselves." Harry didn't mention that it was actually Draco who performed a Disarming Charm on him, and Draco looked sheepish and like he appreciated Harry leaving this out all at once.

"What do you call turning into a lion, then, if not magic?"

"Golden griffin. It's the Animagus Transfiguration. Doesn't show up on the magic detectors. Neither does the use of magical objects, like our tent, our paper sack, our carafe of tea and the Invisibility Cloak."

Now she looked like she was trying not to laugh. "You have a magical paper sack?"

"Endless supply of food. That's how we've been eating."

She looked impressed and surprised. "Oh. That's convenient. Well--all right, then."

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. "So you will?"

"Yes. I will call Alicia and Ruth, that is. Oh, it's not that I don't want to trust you, but if that eventually turned out to be the world's stupidest move, I'd hate to think I passed up the perfect opportunity to find out that you're full of it."

She punched in a telephone number and held the handpiece up to her ear. Harry could hear ringing on the other end, then a familiar voice saying, "*Hello, this is Alicia. I'm frightfully busy right now and can't possibly be*

bothered to answer the telephone, so I'm afraid you have to settle for the sparkling conversation that this machine provides. Speak slowly and carefully and tell me how to contact you and I just might consider doing it. Remember to sound dishy. Speak now." Harry heard a long beep, and while this was sounding, he thought, *She must only ever expect boyfriend candidates to ring.*

"This is Hermione Granger. You might have told me that Har--"

Suddenly, Harry put his hand over her mouth. "Don't say our names!" he hissed. "What if someone were to trace us to Alicia's and break in and listen to her messages?" She nodded, and he uncovered her mouth, muttering, "Sorry," as an afterthought. She resumed speaking to the machine.

"Like I said, you might have mentioned your, er, 'visitors' to me when you called earlier in the week. Please call me back as soon as you get this message." She rang off and looked at Harry. "If I call Ruth, will she also be conveniently out?"

Harry glanced at a clock sitting on a drop cloth-covered table. "She's probably still at school. And Alicia--I don't know what I was thinking. Of course you couldn't get her; she just dropped us in front of your building, then went off to meet some friends at the National Gallery. I can't believe how stupid I was to suggest you call her..."

Hermione smiled ruefully. "All right. I'll trust you until I can contact them. And hopefully after that as well, but we'll just see. Don't make me sorry."

Harry nodded earnestly. "Right. Now about that help; neither one of us should probably climb ladders, but I've got one good hand and Draco has two. If we have a bit of lunch first, I don't see why we can't help you paint."

She looked at them uncertainly, then shrugged and said, "Well, you're already covered with it, so the damage is done. Let's go see what's in the fridge. And maybe you can show me that magical sack of yours."

But before they could move an inch, there was a loud buzzing noise coming from near the front door.

"What's that?" Harry said sharply, all of his nerve-endings jangling. Hermione shrugged and walked to the door. She pressed a button on a small cream-colored box with a grille which was mounted on the wall at head-height.

"Yes?" she said into the grille.

"Police, ma'am. You called 999 from this location. Is everything all right?" It sounded like a woman.

She took her finger off the button and said, "Damn! I forgot--" Then she pressed the button again and said, "Yes. Just fine. Thanks anyway. It was an accident." Her voice wavered ever so slightly, and the crackling voice on the other end said, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to let me judge that for myself."

Hermione sighed. "Of course," she said into the grille, then moved her finger to a blue button next to the white one she'd been pressing. When she did this, another loud buzzing sound was heard, and Harry could hear it simultaneously through the open window that overlooked the street, followed by the sound of the outer door opening. He grabbed the Invisibility Cloak and threw it on.

Draco spun around, looking for him. "Harry! Where are you? Dammit! I need to hide too!"

"No you don't; your face wasn't all over the Muggle news. Just deal with the cop, all right?" Draco went into the kitchen, and Harry was about to tell him to help Hermione, but he didn't want his voice heard by the cop in the corridor, so he bit his tongue. A moment later there was a knock at the door and Hermione smiled feebly in Harry's direction, then turned to open it. It was a rather young woman, no more than twenty-five, tall and thin with a slightly pinched look about her face and very suspicious-looking eyes. She took off her hat and held it under her arm, revealing very short-cropped dark hair. Her blue uniform was crisp and practically crackled with starch.

"Do you live here?" she asked Hermione briskly, while pulling out a small pad of paper and a pencil.

Hermione was appropriately meek. "Yes, ma'am."

She looked up from her pad. "Name?"

"Hermione Granger." The cop registered no recognition of the name. "Do you have any identification?"

Hermione went to a purse sitting on a table in the corridor leading to the living room, and removed what looked like a passport, which she showed to the cop, who nodded and read it closely, then glanced back and forth between the photo and Hermione's face. Then she managed to worm her way into the corridor and stroll casually to the living room, taking in the drop cloths and ladder and paint.

"Where are your parents?"

"At work," she said, obviously not interested in explaining her living situation. "They're dentists." Technically, she was telling the truth. They probably were at work--in Greenwich.

"So, you're out of school?"

Hermione hesitated. "Temporarily. I'm going back soon." To the best of Harry's knowledge, that was *not* true. Perhaps Hermione was worried that the cop would figure out that she was painting the flat because she planned to leave the country, and alert the authorities. The young woman continued to pace about, and several times Harry had to move out of her way, trying to walk as slowly and quietly as he could, hoping she would stop moving about soon.

"So," she said, as though she knew she was barely two arm-lengths away from an escaped convict. "Painting, eh?"

Draco emerged from the kitchen without his crutches, hopping just a little on his good foot, and came up behind Hermione, putting his arms around her waist and giving her a smacking kiss on the cheek.

"I am afraid it is all my fault, officer," Draco said in a strange sort of sing-song mock-Swedish accent, his arms tightening around Hermione, who looked shocked. "I vas distracting her ven she vas about to use the telefone, and she dropped it in some paint, vich made de nine stick..."

Hermione couldn't move, Draco was holding her so tightly. Harry thought he might be holding onto her for support, since he didn't have the crutches. Hermione nodded at the sticky phone on the table, which the cop bent over to examine without touching. She straightened up, nodding and put her pad of paper back in her pocket.

"Right, then. Try to be more careful. Put the telephone someplace safe while you're painting, hear?"

But Draco had started moving his lips down the side of Hermione's neck, then up again, nipping lightly at her earlobe. Hermione had a glazed expression on her face and her eyes were partially closed. One of Draco's arms was just below her breasts, and his other hand was pressed flat against her stomach. Her breathing didn't seem to be quite normal. The cop cleared her throat loudly, making Hermione jump away from him. Now the cop had a smile curling at the corner of her mouth.

"Well, I can see how you probably became 'distracted.' Just see to it you don't accidentally dial 999 the next time you become 'distracted.'"

Hermione was blushing furiously. "Yes, ma'am," she mumbled, walking her to the door to the flat. Suddenly the cop turned on her heel and confronted Draco.

"What is your name? And where are you from?"

Draco looked panicked for a second; then he seemed to have a red light in his eyes.

"Lars Bergen. I am from Sveden," he said promptly.

She grinned. "Oh, I thought you might be Swedish! Can you listen to this?" And she let fly a stream of something that clearly wasn't English; it went on for several minutes. Draco stood listening attentively, and Harry thought, *How the hell is he going to get out of this?*

But when she was done, smiling and proud of herself, he grinned at her. "Dat vas vonderfall! Qvite good, qvite good! You must haff been practicing!"

She blushed a little and looked bashful. "I have a pen-friend in Stockholm and I'm getting ready to go visit him."

"Oh, my!" he said. "No von vill know you haff not lived there all of your life!" He put his hand on her back and steered her toward the door, only limping a little bit.

"You think so?" she said breathlessly.

"Qvite positiff. You should not vait any longer; you should go as soon as possible." Yeah, Harry thought. Like *right now*.

She looked quite happy. "Yes. Yes, I will! Thank you! I mean, *tahck soh muck-eh.*"

"Oh, you're velcome, you're velcome! And tank *you* for being so concerned about us."

"Vaw-SHOH-good," she said earnestly. Draco nodded at her.

"Vaw-SHOH-good," he agreed, clearly not having any idea what he was saying. She smiled and nodded some more, reaching for the doorknob. Once she was in the corridor and the door to the flat was securely closed and locked, Hermione sagged against the wall near the kitchen, relieved that the ordeal was over. Draco limped over to her from the door.

"So," he said to her softly. "You found that--distracting, did you?"

She didn't answer him, but it seemed that she couldn't look away from him either. He put his hands on either side of her head, supporting himself and trapping her, bringing his head very close to hers. "You *liked* it, I could tell..." he said breathily, before leaning in to press his lips against her neck again. She threw back her head and made an incoherent noise in

her throat, and then he moved his lips up to hers, which opened, and he started moving one of his hands down her body, wrapping the other arm around her waist, then moving his hand below her waist, while the kiss continued and Hermione began to moan softly. Harry tore off the Invisibility Cloak, disgusted.

"Just because I'm invisible with this thing on doesn't mean I'm *not here!*" he said, unable to keep the irritation out of his voice. Hermione jumped and pushed Draco away, having obviously forgotten that they weren't alone. Harry thought Draco looked odd around the eyes again, and his facial expression was both familiar and unlike his best friend. It looked like he wore an expression borrowed from someone else, someone Harry knew he'd seen. There was a cruelty around the mouth, and something about the eyes that seemed to say, *I take what I want*. Harry shivered and tried to restore some normalcy to the situation, reminding them that they were going to eat lunch. Suddenly, something seemed to go out of Draco; he immediately appeared to be more relaxed and started talking about how hungry he was for something that didn't come out of a magical paper sack.

There was enough food in the fridge to feed the three of them (leftover Indian and Greek food), and they got to work after eating in the small, neat stainless-steel kitchen (whose walls were already painted white). They spent the afternoon painting. Harry decided to shrink his hair and beard again, as it was very hot in the flat; Hermione was as fascinated by this process as Ruth had been. He noticed that Hermione and Draco seemed to be steering a wide path around each other during the rest of the day.

After it began to get dark, Hermione tried calling Alicia and Ruth again, this time successfully. When she was done speaking to both of them she looked up at Harry and Draco.

"You pass. Ruth wanted to know whether you're both eating well and Alicia told me the pair of you took turns sharing her bed for sleeping and were both perfect gentlemen." She smirked. "Of course, it depends on your definition of the phrase. Something like that *could* wreak havoc with a girl's ego...."

Harry grimaced. "Come on. We each just lost a girlfriend. After that you don't just--you know. Not after a month, anyway." Harry wondered whether she'd argue with this assessment, considering the attention Draco had been giving to her neck earlier.

She smiled, then clucked at him. "And I thought you might turn out to be the one with the sense of humor." Draco glared at her, and she responded as though he were a dog who'd peed on the carpet. "Don't you look at me like that! Of course, the other explanation is that you're a couple, but then

I suppose you would have let her sleep on the couch and taken the bed for yourselves...."

"We are *not* a couple," Draco growled, making Hermione laugh out loud. She was clearly enjoying needling him.

"You should see your face..."

They cleaned up for dinner; Hermione suggested they go out to eat, but Harry explained to her that he only had sixteen pounds. She didn't seem to relish the idea of paying for all three of them, so they ate food from the paper sack, which she found novel and interesting, as she hadn't been eating out of it for a month. They did a little more painting in the evening, but by nine o'clock, both Harry and Draco were having trouble keeping their eyes open. Hermione teased them about this.

"Planning to save the world, but you can't stay awake past the bedtime for an eight-year-old..."

"Sod off," Draco snapped automatically, as though he hadn't been attacking Hermione's neck with his lips earlier in the day. Harry glared at him. "Er, sorry. I mean--we've been keeping odd hours. Traveling at night, that sort of thing."

She nodded. "Right. Your circadian rhythms are all out of whack. I was just kidding, anyway. You have no sense of humor."

Draco drew himself up. "I have a finely honed sense of humor, thank you very much. You should hear some of the insults I've used on Ron Weasley over the years."

She laughed. "That *does* sound like fun--" she began, but Harry interrupted her.

"Some other time, perhaps. Can't we just work out the sleeping arrangements?"

Hermione shrugged. "There's not much to work out. I'll sleep in my room, and you two can decide who gets Edith's room and who gets the spare room."

"You have *three* bedrooms?"

"Well, we had to choose between using our combined money for a decent flat or a decent car. So we have a grotty car we share--I just got my license last October--and a nice flat. We get a lot of guests. Visiting musicians, mostly. I suppose if we'd gotten a *very* nice car we could let visitors sleep in that, but I doubt they'd ever come again. No one cares if a musician arrives in a hatbox on skates as long as he or she *does* show

up. And technically, it's a four-bedroom flat; the fourth is a practice room. We installed some acoustical tiles on the walls and ceiling, which we're going to have to rip down now. We can attack that problem tomorrow. It's so fantastic to have some help..." Suddenly, Draco let out a loud snore. Hermione bristled. "The nerve--!"

"Hermione--we're both knackered. Cut him some slack. Here; help me wake him so he can hobble to bed...."

Harry took the spare room and gave Draco some of the clothes Alicia had given them so they'd be able to change on the subsequent part of their journey. It was absolutely luxurious to sleep in a real bed with no one else. Harry was reluctant to get up in the morning, but by eight o'clock, Hermione was bouncing on his bed wearing different paint-spattered shorts from the day before and a red sleeveless T-shirt. He put on his glasses, bringing her into sharp focus. Seeing her clearly now, it suddenly occurred to Harry that the sight of her pale arms was decidedly odd.

"What happened to your tattoos?"

"Good morning to you, too." She glanced down at her arms. She was kneeling near the foot of the bed. Harry thought there ought to be a law against being so alert before noon. Especially on a Saturday. "I never actually had tattoos. That stuff was painted with henna. It's long-lasting, but not permanent. A friend did it. What do think I am, daft? Tattoos are dangerous. You can get infections that way."

"What about your piercings?"

She put her hands up to her ears. All of the holes were empty today, but they were still visible. He assumed she didn't want to get paint on any of her jewelry. "I'll have you know that every one of these was done in a proper sterile environment by a nurse. And you'll notice it's only my ears. I would never do my eyebrows or nose or tongue or lips...too risky."

He smiled at her and sat up, the sheet slipping down. "Well, I'm glad you haven't permanently covered up that collection of freckles on the back of your left arm that looks like a smiling face. I always rather liked that..."

She stiffened. "And just *when* would you have seen *that*?"

He froze. *Oh. I shouldn't have said that.*

She wouldn't let it go. "What did that prat mean last night when he said I was a 'good shag'?"

He felt a bit irritable suddenly. "You didn't think he was such a prat when his tongue was in your mouth..."

She flushed. "Never mind that. And he said something about a 'time change'."

Harry stared at her. How could he possibly tell her about their relationship in his other life? She would probably react even more poorly than when he'd taken off the Invisibility Cloak.

"Time," he said musingly, trying to figure out what, if anything, he should tell her. "You're planning to go to America, right? Because of the possibility of war. Well--we're planning to go back in time to change something so that all of this will never have happened. We need to get something at Dover to help us do that."

She stared at him, incredulous. "Change time? You can *do* that? How far back?"

"Fifteen-and-a-half years."

"*What?* Are you mad? Think how much you'd be changing!"

"Yes, that's the trouble. Eight months ago--I changed it. And now *this* horrible world exists. What I'm trying to do is change it *back*."

She sat back on her heels. "Oh," she said simply, unprepared for this. "Why did you change it?" she whispered. He looked at her desperately.

"To save my mother's life. And to *give* my sister a chance at a life. My mother was pregnant when she died."

"And now they're both gone," she said quietly.

"It never occurred to me that it wouldn't be a good thing to save someone's life. But now I know; some deaths *are* necessary. She chose to make a sacrifice, and a lot of good came out of that. Voldemort lost his power and there were thirteen years of peace in the wizarding world because of it. And now *this* Voldemort--who never lost his power--and his followers are bringing the Muggle world to the brink of war. And it's all my fault. I have to fix the timelines before it gets any worse. This world can't just go on. It never should have been."

She stared into space, frowning. "What's the world like, then, in the life you used to live?"

He shrugged. "Where do I start? The Soviet Union broke up a few years ago. When the Berlin Wall was being dismantled, it was a big party being broadcast around the world. It lasted quite a while. People were selling chunks of the wall for souvenirs, but I rather get the impression the bottom's dropped out of the market. Too many people marketing

forgeries, I think. Now there's a unified Germany, and it's part of the E.U.--"

"The what?"

"European Union. Oh, and there's the Chunnel. And, um--some rather awful things, too. But they were just caused by human stubbornness as far as I can tell, not wizards. Like the war in Bosnia--"

"Isn't that part of Yugoslavia?"

He smiled. "I should have known you'd know that. Most people never heard of it before the war. And it's not part of Yugoslavia any more."

"Hmm. I played at a festival in Sarajevo. It seemed peaceful enough to me."

"In this world, yes. There's good and bad in all, times, of course, but the difference here is that this world was *never meant to be*. It needs to be fixed."

"Hmm," she said again, picking at the blankets with her fingers. "You mentioned my freckles on my arm and your friend mentioned shagging. In this other life, what were we to each other?"

Harry caught his breath. "You--you were my girlfriend," he finally admitted. "Most brilliant Muggle-born witch Hogwarts has seen in a very long time. Most brilliant witch period, really, Muggle-born or not."

"And we--" she said, looking down at the bed and raising her eyebrows. Harry grimaced and nodded, flushing. "I see."

Harry closed his eyes and groaned. "I was afraid of this. Now you feel weird. I didn't think it was a good idea for you to know. I mean, in this time, I'm practically a stranger to you. Now you're thinking about all of things I must know about you, and what I've seen, and what we've done together--"

He opened his eyes to see her sitting, hugging her knees to her chest. "Well, no, I *wasn't*, but I certainly am *now*. Thanks a lot."

"Erm--sorry. See? I keep putting my foot in it."

"Oh, don't be sorry," she smiled now, a little bashfully. "It's kind of cute. You're so awkward about it." There was a silence between them. Finally, she said, "Well. You know what I look like without my clothes, but I can't say the same. And right now I can only see half of you." Harry looked down; he hadn't slept with a shirt on. "Mind you, it's a very nice half--"

"Ginny," he said softly, as a reminder. Now she flushed and looked down.

"You loved her very much, didn't you?" He nodded. "Were," she hesitated; "were we in--in love?"

He opened his mouth to answer, then shut it. How could he explain what she was to him? He wished he could say *Yes, we were madly in love*, but he'd be lying if he did. "I--I loved you very much. You're one of my two best friends in the world, brilliant and principled....and it was wonderful to experience, um, some of the things we experienced together for the first time with someone who made me feel so safe and accepted. It felt so natural to go from being friends to being friends who had a physical relationship. The trouble was--"

"So we weren't in love," she said softly. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid not."

She nodded. "I suppose that's why you were with Ginny in this life." He drew his lips into a line.

"She was the only one who ever made you feel insecure about us in my other life. I think you already suspected I had feelings for her..."

She shrugged. "So why weren't you with her instead?"

He sighed. "I should have been, I suppose, if I hadn't been such a prat--if I'd seen her for herself before someone else did. But I didn't. And then the person she was with did something--he sacrificed quite a lot--in part to be acceptable to her family, so they wouldn't be upset about their being together. There was a lot of bad blood between the families. It would have been more than a little awkward for me to sweep in then and say, 'Oh, Ginny, I'm ready to reciprocate that little crush you had on me when you were ten, and oh, by the way, Draco, I'm planning to make off with your girlfriend now after you put your dad in prison to prove to her family you deserve her, which caused your mother to disown you, and which is the reason why you're now a charity case....'"

"Draco? He was Ginny's boyfriend? But I thought your sister was his girlfriend."

Harry spoke very quietly. "My sister didn't exist in the other time, remember?"

"Oh," she said simply. After a minute's reflection, she asked, "Does he know?"

"Know what?"

"That Ginny was his girlfriend?"

"No idea. I haven't exactly been keen to tell him."

She nodded, grim-faced. "I can see that." She looked thoughtful. "What if you fix the timelines, get the old world back, and you find that Ginny is still with him and you're still with, er, the 'other' me. What will you do? Will you try to get her away from him? Will you break up with me? I mean--"

--the other you. I understand." He looked down at his hands. "I don't know what I'll do about Ginny. Mostly I just want to see her alive again. To know she's safe. As for us--" He hesitated. "It's rather complex. See, there's Ron to factor into all this..."

"Ron Weasley? What's he got to do with it?"

"Oh, Ron? Only that he's our other best friend--the three of us are pretty close--and he's completely in love with you. *That's* all."

"Ron Weasley? That prat?"

He grinned. "Yes. That prat. The prat you practically *attacked* when you found that he hadn't died in a terrorist explosion in the village near our school...."

She raised her eyebrows. "I did?"

He nodded. "And you weren't too thrilled when he and his girlfriend--um--when they--"

She drew her lips into a line. "I get it, I get it."

He let this sink in before continuing. "And," he went on then, "I knew how he felt about you before I--before we--did anything, but I conveniently forgot about loyalty to my friend and--"

--and behaved like a typical teenage boy," she finished for him. He flushed.

"Exactly. Plus, the last time I saw him I was very hacked off at him because he told me I should break up with you. Actually, it wasn't that so much as the reasons he gave for our being together in the first place. I won't bore you with that, but basically, since he thought they were bad reasons, therefore we shouldn't be together. That and the fact that we weren't technically *in* love, although we did love each other."

She nodded. "But--since you were with Ginny, it seems that you also thought we shouldn't be together..." she said softly.

"Well--actually--that's true. That's another reason I was so hacked off at him; when it came down to brass tacks, he was *right*. There's nothing more annoying. Although I don't agree at all with his reasoning, in the end, I suppose we both came to the same conclusion anyway...."

"So," she said, looking very curious. "What's *your* reasoning, then?"

"What?"

"For why you were with me. I mean, the *other* me."

He swallowed and looked at her earnestly, trying to imagine she was the Hermione from his other life, trying to imagine how he might eventually say this to her. "We--we needed each other very much. We needed another person to cling to, to talk to in the most intimate of ways....And I think we needed it to be a person we *weren't* in love with, because otherwise, everything *matters* so much more, doesn't it? But with friends....We were able to be so comfortable together, so free. I've felt alone all of my life, and suddenly I wasn't anymore, in the most concrete of ways. I'm not sure I can ever really regret anything about what happened between us, although at times I did feel a little regretful that I couldn't say--"

--that you loved me," she whispered. He nodded.

"And then there was deceiving Ron. I *hated* that. Worst of all was after he knew, when he had this *look*, this look that seemed to say, 'Oh, well, what should I have expected, Harry always gets everything and I always get nothing.' I felt so dreadful, and like the world's worst friend...."

They were silent, then finally Hermione stood and went to the door. "Well, I'll go see what there is for breakfast. What do you fancy?" She seemed determined to shake off the melancholy mood, but her upbeat voice sounded a little forced.

He shrugged. "I'll eat anything."

She looked at him wistfully, and he thought it was just possible she wasn't talking about food when she asked him what he fancied. She nodded and left.

* * * * *

They worked all weekend at painting the flat, finally finishing late Sunday night. On Monday, the three of them moved furniture back into place and started helping Hermione pack framed artwork and other things to be shipped to America. When they were eating dinner, Harry said to her, "What's the best way to get to Dover? For people who are walking?"

"Walking?" she said, incredulous. "You do realize that it's about eighty miles from here, I hope?"

"Oh," he said quickly; that was farther than London was from Sywell. Alicia had driven them down in about an hour-and-a-half; it probably would have taken them four or five days of walking and flying, possibly longer with their injuries.

"What do you want to walk for? I can drive you. It should be less than two hours."

He jerked his head up. "You'd do that?"

She nodded, chewing. When she'd swallowed she said, "Think of it as payment for the painting assistance. I'd have been working on the place all this week still if it weren't for you."

Harry grinned at her and resisted the urge to kiss her. "That's great! Thanks. And then, after that, I guess we just have to work out how to get to Wales...."

She rolled her eyes. "I can take a hint. All right, I can take you to Wales after that."

He was horrified. "No! I didn't mean--"

"It's fine. A little less than two hours back here, and then between two and three hours to Wales, depending on the traffic. We might want to do the trip to Dover and back in one day, and then the trip to Wales after a good night's sleep, since that'll be almost six hours round trip, allowing for stops."

Harry hesitated for a moment; she didn't realize that for him and Draco, the trip to Wales was one-way. He nodded. "That sounds fine."

Draco looked at the two of them, that odd expression that Harry didn't like behind his eyes again. He went to his room without saying goodnight, leaving Harry and Hermione to watch television in a living room that still smelled unmistakably of paint. They didn't get up to go to their bedrooms until it was nearly midnight, and when he was about to turn the knob of his bedroom door, Hermione suddenly raised herself on her toes and kissed his cheek.

"Good night, Harry."

He did not kiss her back. "Good night, Hermione," he said softly, and when he was in his room, he closed the door and leaned on it with a sigh of relief.

* * * * *

"Here we are!" Hermione announced, making a right turn onto Park Street. Harry looked around.

"Where?"

"Dover!" she said, grinning.

"Erm, I probably should have said, but--I didn't mean the *town* of Dover. I meant The White Cliffs of."

She nodded. "Oh, I see. Well, that's only about another fifteen minutes. You want to go northeast, right?"

He hesitated. "Actually, I have no idea. Do you, Draco?" He turned to his best friend, sitting in the back seat again. He'd been very disgruntled during this trip, since, unlike Alicia, Hermione did not have a large expensively comfortable Range Rover. When he first saw her battered yellow 1972 Volkswagen Beetle, he almost bolted. The front fender looked distinctly like it belonged on another car, and the curving pieces of metal over the two front wheels were turquoise blue on the driver's side and kelly green on the passenger's side.

"We're supposed to go to Dover in *that* thing?"

Hermione had crossed her arms and glared at him. "Would you rather *hobble* there and back?"

He wasn't using the crutches any more, but he still had a pronounced limp. He had glared back.

"I get the back seat. So I can put my leg up," he had snarled at her.

"Fine," she'd snarled back. Harry rolled his eyes. It was as though they had something to prove, he thought, the way they bickered. He was reminded strongly of Ron and Hermione in his old life--and of how many times in *this* life Draco had reminded him of Ron and Ron of Draco. He also remembered the way she had immediately responded to his lips on her neck....

They returned to Maison Dieu Road in order to reach Castle Hill Road, and after a little while they saw a lighthouse in the distance, and more than a few cars and tour buses.

"Oh, I remember this!" Hermione said excitedly as they pulled into the car park. "This lighthouse has something to do with Marconi....We're at South Foreland."

"Are there always so many tourists?" Harry asked irritably. She shrugged. He turned to Draco.

"I don't remember a lighthouse, do you?"

Draco looked thoughtful, and for once, like himself. "Maybe the Death Eaters turned it off while we were here."

"That's dangerous!"

Draco looked at him as though he were the world's biggest idiot. "And Death Eaters care about that *because--?*"

"Yeah, yeah," Harry muttered. Of course Voldemort and his followers didn't care whether Muggle ships ran aground or ripped open their hulls on the rocks. Harry looked at the undulating line of the cliff edge, disappearing north and south, a seemingly infinite thing. He realized that they were probably going to have to comb the coast for miles looking for the configuration of rocks he'd laid out to look like a mouse with a curving tail. He didn't really have any idea where the meeting place of the Death Eaters was. 'Dover' was the best he could do. And how was he going to fly in his griffin form with a bunch of *tourists* crowding about that stupid lighthouse?

They walked to the lighthouse, then discreetly avoided going in the door with the other tourists and continued walking toward the edge of the cliffs. Hermione put her hand on Harry's arm. "Don't go too close," she cautioned. "It's about a three-hundred-foot drop, and there aren't any railings."

"I know, I know; I'm keeping well away," he said. They walked on the springy grass, scattered with red and yellow wildflowers, scanning the land around them for the sort of rocks Harry had described. He decided rather randomly to begin the search by walking south; if they came to the city before he found what he was looking for, they would return to the lighthouse and start searching north of it. They stayed about fifteen feet away from the edge of the cliffs. In a little while, the lighthouse had disappeared behind a rise of ground (that must be how I didn't see it before, Harry thought). Several times, he investigated a collection of rocks only to discover that the arrangement was a natural formation, or at least, not the one he'd created. When they'd been walking along the cliffs and going back and forth looking at rocks for over two hours, Harry came to something that looked familiar. Something about the way the cliff looked here....

He walked slowly to the edge, ignoring Hermione's terrified howl. He looked down; even though it had been dark, he knew this was it; it was where he'd thrown the body of the heir into the sea. He turned, having a vague idea where the circle of Death Eaters had stood. He thought about

where he had stood and started walking away from the cliffs purposefully, then stopped. He looked all around the landscape; there wasn't another human visible on the vast expanse of wind-blown grass, and they were well away from the road. He concentrated hard, feeling the transfiguration ripple through his body, and when his paws hit the ground, he heard Hermione gasp, but he couldn't concentrate on that. He spread his wings and leapt into the air, moving his wings slowly, staring down at the landscape, and soon he was sure he'd found it.

He circled down, vaguely aware of Draco and Hermione running over the long spring grass to catch up to him. He immediately changed back into a human and ran his hands over the one large stone and six smaller stones, pressed into the earth on the night of the winter solstice. It was almost midsummer now, and they had become firmly rooted, scoured by the sea wind on one side only, just as though they'd always been there. With some difficulty, he removed the third rock from the soil just as Draco and Hermione reached him. He could see the dark tip of the end of the wand. He tried to grasp it but it wouldn't come out.

"Help me!" he said to the two of them, and soon all three of them were scrabbling in the dirt with their fingers, moving more and more of the soil away from the wood, until finally, Harry tugged on it and he fell backward, Voldemort's wand in his hand, dirt still clinging to it.

He sat staring at it in amazement. *I've got it*, he thought. And then, *Maybe this is really going to happen*.

Suddenly, he heard someone--not Draco or Hermione--cry out his name.

"Harry!"

He jerked his head up; had he been tracked down?

But he saw someone he never thought he'd see again, and someone he thoroughly welcomed seeing. He rose to his feet, feeling like laughing, then ran to meet the tall, thin man with the black hair and hooked nose.

"Dad! What are you doing here?" Then he saw that Charlie was behind his stepfather. "And Charlie! How--how on earth did you know?"

His dad picked up Harry's wrist, thereby raising Voldemort's wand. "This is how I knew. Albus told me about you stealing the wand. It's easier for us to avoid pursuit than you, since we can Apparate--although that *can* be detected, so we have to run very quickly after arriving somewhere...."

Harry panicked. "Did you Apparate here?"

"No," he smiled. "We Apparated to Dover some time ago, and we've been coming out here every day to see whether you'd made it yet. Sometimes we stayed the night down in the magazine."

"The *what*?"

"We're not far from Fan Bay here," Charlie explained. "There were a number of underground tunnels built a few hundred yards back from the cliff edge during World War II. The abandoned magazine and battery are still there. It's not bad as abandoned tunnels go, really. They're square and have plenty of headroom, and we swept out some debris."

"I found them by accident when I was younger," his stepfather explained, "when I first became a Death Eater and came out here for--well, you know."

Charlie put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "How've you been, Harry?"

Harry grinned at him. "I'm better now than I have been for a long, long time. My wrist is healed, for one thing." He waved it around; just the day before, he'd stopped wearing the sling and the ace bandage. "I sprained it in Northamptonshire."

"Oh, is *that* where you went after Manchester?" a superior voice drawled behind him.

Harry spun around; he hadn't heard the sound of people arriving by Apparition, since the sea was rather loud. His heart leapt into his throat. No, he thought. It can't be...

"Dad!" Draco cried, and Harry could see that he was trembling. Hermione instinctively reached her hand out to him and he held it. Standing next to Lucius Malfoy was Barty Crouch, Jr.

"My man went to that park--what was it called? Birchfields?--but he said no one was there. It was the first solid lead we'd had since you sent the Longbottoms on a merry chase to Inverness and before that, mucking around a bit with a golf game in Fraserburgh. My man there followed one of the golfers to a football match, thinking you might be there, but he didn't locate you." Harry's jaw dropped; that was why Roger Davies had been there! "Yes, we discovered the signatures from the wandless magic you did, although until now, I didn't understand how it was that you'd escaped from Azkaban. So. You're a golden griffin Animagus...."

"You saw?" He couldn't stop himself. Then Mr. Malfoy held up what was clearly an Invisibility Cloak; perhaps he hadn't Apparated after all. That was why he hadn't seen anyone else around when he'd decided to transfigure; Lucius Malfoy had been under the cloak; perhaps Barty Crouch, too.

"We tracked you two down," he pointed to Charlie and his dad, "weeks ago, and found that you were coming out here regularly to just sit around and wait. We figured that must mean you expected Harry to be here at some point. So we decided we could bide our time too. Except, you never knew that we were waiting here with an Invisibility Cloak." Harry stared at his dad and Charlie, who looked chagrined that they'd led Lucius Malfoy to him. Mr. Malfoy addressed him now.

"Now, normally, I'd say it's a shame to waste something like the talent to be an Animagus. Especially since you're in the service of the Dark Lord...."

"I'm *not*," he said, hate roiling through his body.

"Oh, yes you are. You see, what you don't know is that when you were a baby, the dark lord put an Obedience Charm on you. What this means is--"

"I know about the charm, and I know what it means!" he said impatiently.

Mr. Malfoy gave him a lopsided smile. "Oh, you *do*, do you? Well, if you say you don't want more information, fine, I won't burden you with it...."

Draco pulled his wand out and pointed it at his father.

"Get the hell out of here and swear you will not tell anyone about our being here."

His father looked at his son dispassionately for a few seconds before breaking out into peals of delighted laughter. "Or *what?*" he said to his son. "I'm here to do several things. First, I shall turn Harry Potter in to the Ministry of Magic. The fact that it has become public knowledge that Barty here is a Death Eater--although no one can trace any crimes to him--and my turning Harry in could very well mean that *I* will be the next Minister. Once I am, I will have the power to truly serve my Master, who will be the *true* Minister of Magic. Poor old Crouch is in disgrace, between the revelation about his son, setting dementors on Harry in court and then being unable to apprehend him after his escape. The only thing keeping everyone from showing Crouch the door is the lack of a decent replacement." He held his arms out as if to present himself for inspection to a buyer. "Behold the replacement."

"*You?*" his son said, incredulous. "The Minister of Magic? More like the Minister of Mayhem..."

"*Silence!*" he cried suddenly, pointed his wand at Draco, and a moment later, Draco was clutching at his mouth; his lips were apparently sewn shut. He grunted through them at his father, and Harry had the feeling that if he had the power of speech, he'd be using every swear he knew. But everything stayed behind the sealed lips.

"Of course," he continued, his wand pointing at Harry now, "once you're in Azkaban, it will be quite easy to replace you with a decoy and to have you serve the dark lord. Remember though--refuse his orders, and you will die....Plus, I will get to present my Master with his stolen wand. I will be honored above all of his other servants...."

He turned and nodded at Barty Crouch, Jr. They pointed their wands at Severus Snape, Hermione and Charlie; thick ropes shot from their wands, and the three were tied together, facing outward, their arms trapped in the dark ropes that bound them. Their ankles were tied as well. Then both Malfoy and Crouch cried, "*Crucio!*" and pointed their wands again, Crouch at Draco, Lucius Malfoy at Harry. Harry was vaguely aware of Draco's anguished cry as he sank to his knees, pain blossoming seemingly along his spinal chord, so that it could then be fed into every nerve ending in his body. Draco's mouth was still sewn shut, but Harry could hear a cry resonating in his throat....

He tried to concentrate, to separate himself, but he was out of practice, and hadn't had the chance to separate his mind from his body before the curse had hit him. Finally, with a wrench and a final cry of agony, he pulled away from his corporeal self and looked down at the scene in fascination, seeing once again that slow-motion crackling of light between the wands and his and Draco's body. Draco was writhing on the ground and Hermione, trapped with his stepfather and Charlie Weasley, had terrified tears inching down her cheeks, not understanding what was happening. Then he saw that her face looked like it was getting redder and redder, and he realized now that she looked *angry* not frightened or sad. She was practically *purple* with rage now, and suddenly the bonds which held the three of them burst and went flying slowly in all directions (although Harry realized it was probably really happening very fast).

His dad and Charlie didn't waste any time; even though, to Harry, they were moving slowly, it seemed that they still managed to pull their wands out of their Muggle clothes rather quickly, and immediately aimed, his dad at Crouch, Charlie at Mr. Malfoy. In his strange out-of-body state, Harry saw their lips move. Then he saw the wands fly through the air into his dad's and Charlie's hands, saw that Draco was lying on the ground again, panting, his mouth open again, seemingly free from the pain. As he sank down into his body, he was aware of Crouch and Mr. Malfoy flying backwards, and he knew what would happen, but he was powerless to stop it.

He slid back down into his body and time sped up again, and suddenly, Crouch and Mr. Malfoy were sailing over the edge of the cliff, screaming, their faces contorted in terror. Harry knew that, since they were moving, they could not Apparate. He knew it was a drop of several hundred feet onto a beach that was merely a shingle. He knew they could not possibly survive the fall.

Harry jumped when he heard the impact. He stood very still, staring at the air above the cliff where they'd each been moments before. Draco and Hermione came to stand on his left; his dad and Charlie to his right. Evidently, none of them felt compelled to look down at the bodies. Harry turned suddenly and said quietly, "Thanks, Charlie."

Charlie looked a bit shell-shocked, but he shrugged. "You saved Ron's life. And you're my friend. It's the least I could do."

Draco turned now, looking, Harry thought, about nine-years-old. "Th-thanks, Professor Snape," he said nervously. Harry's stepfather smiled at him.

"A good son deserves a good father," he intoned, looking earnestly at the blond boy. "You didn't have one."

Draco nodded, not disagreeing. Hermione shivered, even though it was a warm spring day, and Draco put his arm around her shoulder. She didn't object. Her face was still wet and she still had far more color in her face than she normally did. Harry turned to her. "And thank you for having very bad control over your magical abilities. And a terrible temper," he said, smiling, and she finally smiled back.

Charlie whistled through his teeth. "If that's what she can do *without* a wand, I'd hate to see her *with* one."

Harry laughed. "A terror. A complete and utter terror." He grinned at her some more, and now she wasn't flushing because of her rage at Lucius Malfoy.

"Well," his dad said, clapping his hands together. "Albus tells me the two of you are going to Wales. May I ask why?"

Harry looked nervously at Draco and Hermione. "Er--we have to do something--"

"Are you *sure* you have to do it? Because we've gotten fake Muggle passports for the two of you. We're going to France. Charlie's already sent Ron on ahead. It wasn't safe for him here any longer. He's with his brother Percy."

Harry wavered. It was tempting. Perhaps he *could* just forge a new life there, try to make the best of things....But then he thought of the war again, and knew he could not.

"We--we may do that. But we have to go to Wales first, we have to at least *try* to do--this thing..."

His stepfather put his hand on his shoulder. "All right. But please be careful. And here--" he withdrew an envelope from his jacket pocket. "Here's money for your plane tickets. We'll watch for you every day."

Charlie suddenly seemed very urgent. "But right now..." he said, "we need to break out the Polyjuice Potion. Before Aurors arrive and find those bodies. They're sure to pick up on the Cruciatus Curse *and* the Disarming Charm...."

"Polyjuice Potion is--"

"I know, dad. You don't have to explain."

"Well--all right then. We've been using it every so often. We have some little snippets here and there of various anonymous people's hair." He removed several envelopes from his pockets, and Charlie took a large thermal carafe from the bag slung on his back. He poured some of the viscous liquid into a cup and his stepfather added a hair from one of the envelopes, handing it to Harry.

"You're going to drink something with a *hair* in it?" Hermione exclaimed, horrified.

"It is necessary, young lady," his dad said to her stiffly. Then he furrowed his brow. "And you are--"

"Hermione Granger," she said, with her chin up. "Muggle-born witch," she added proudly. He smiled at her.

"Good," he said, taking some scissors out of his other pocket. "Cut off some of Harry's hair for me."

"What?"

"Just do it," Harry said to her gently. She did it with her tongue between her teeth, handing his dad the small lock of hair she'd removed.

"Good. Now Charlie and I can masquerade as you. Two Harry Potters running about--who know how to Apparate--should confuse them for a bit."

Harry smiled, then drank the potion. Charlie had poured more in the meantime, putting a hair from another envelope into the cup and handing it to Draco. Harry began to feel strange and queasy as Draco was drinking. The world looked odd, and he realized it was because he'd become someone who didn't need glasses, so he took them off and put them in his pocket. He looked down; he didn't appear to be all that different. The hair on the backs of his hands was very pale, and he thought he saw blond hair hanging down on his forehead.

Draco, however, was changing more drastically. He shrank by several inches and his hair became grey but looking as though it had once been black; his back hunched over and his shoulders and hips broadened, as well as his legs; he was straining against his clothes now. Finally, he grew *breasts* that hung to his waist, and Harry fought the urge to laugh at his wizened face. Draco had transformed into an old woman.

He looked down in horror and said, his voice no longer his own, "What have you done? I'm an old hag!"

Hermione covered her mouth, but her eyes were merry. "Come on, Nana," she finally said, laughing. "We'll walk you back to the car."

In the meantime, Harry's dad and Charlie had put his hairs in some potion, and now there were two Harry Potters standing before them, identical down to the last eyelash, except that they didn't have glasses. They both squinted a little.

"I forgot about the eyesight," his stepfather--he thought--said with his voice.

"We don't need perfect eyesight to Apparate," the other Harry said.

Harry grinned at them. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Just show up safe and sound in France," the first Harry said, giving him a firm hug. A second later, both Harrys had vanished, and Hermione, a young blond man and what seemed to be her elderly grandmother (a very grouchy old woman she was, too) began to walk over the grass back toward the South Foreland lighthouse....

* * * * *

The drive back to London was uneventful except for when Harry and Draco changed back into their own bodies about half-way through. As soon as he was thoroughly himself again, Draco started telling Harry what he thought of Charlie and his dad turning him into an old woman....

Harry and Hermione listened, but had secret smiles on their faces they wouldn't let him see. It *had* been funny....

When they rose the next day, after eating breakfast, they packed the tent, all of their clothes, the paper sack and the carafe and Invisibility Cloak into the little boot of Hermione's car. Harry felt his stomach leaping about in him as they set out for Wales. *It's finally happening*, he thought. *We're going to do it...*

It felt like a long drive, even though it was only a little longer than the trip to Dover. They started at ten o'clock, so by twelve they decided it would

be nice to stop for some lunch. They managed to get off the M4 and drove into a little village called Leigh Delamere. They pulled up outside a smart-looking pub that looked like it was hoping to get a lot of American tourists as customers. They slid into a small table in the back corner and ordered fish and chips and ginger beers while the bar began to fill with locals who didn't seem put off by the shiny newness of the decor.

They took almost a full hour for lunch, having grown very weary of being in the cramped little car. Harry wished he knew how to transfigure it into a Range Rover (and that doing so wouldn't be likely to bring the Ministry or Death Eaters down upon them).

After they'd eaten, Harry looked up at Draco and said suddenly, "Sorry about your dad." They hadn't spoken about it at all. Charlie Weasley and Severus Snape had killed Barty Crouch, Jr., and Lucius Malfoy. Draco's dad was dead.

But Draco shrugged and looked at Harry with hard, opaque eyes. "It's nothing he didn't deserve. I'm not mourning him, I'll tell you that." Harry swallowed; even though he'd caused his own mother's death, and she'd been about to do a terrible thing, he had still mourned her--was still mourning her. He looked at Hermione for help, but she raised her eyebrows as though she had no idea what to do. Harry sighed.

"I just hope they don't trace it to Dad and Charlie. I hope they make it out of the country..."

Draco nodded. "We'd better go," he said briskly, as though afraid that someone might expect him to start crying over his father. They paid their bill and returned to the car. They didn't have far to go now.

Once they'd arrived in Cardiff, they quickly found another pub, and Hermione went inside alone to ask for directions to Godric's Hollow. When she returned, she was silent, starting the car again without looking at the boys or speaking. Harry thought she looked reluctant for the journey to end; her eyes seemed to be a little moist.

Soon the city gave way to a crisp, green countryside. Rolling green hills receded to severe mountains in the distance. It was a perfect spring day, with a periwinkle blue sky dotted with scudding clouds. Harry respected Hermione's need for silence, which, judging by the torrent of conversation *not* coming from the back seat, was Draco's need, too.

At length, they drove down a bumpy, rutted road, the green of the landscape so vivid it almost didn't seem real. Finally, they saw the cottage in the distance, and Harry's heart felt like it was going to burst from his chest, it was going so fast. When they pulled up in front of it and Hermione turned off the engine, the three of them just sat, staring at the little house for a few minutes before anyone dared speak.

"How long has it been?" Hermione asked softly. Harry was startled by the sound of her voice.

"What?"

"Since--since your parents were killed."

"Halloween night of 1981."

"Oh," she whispered, turning her head to look at the overgrown ruins again. "And no one's bought the place since then?"

Harry thought about this. "I suppose people aren't too keen to buy a property if they're told a murder has taken place there. Mum might have gotten offers, I don't know. I suppose she never wanted to sell. It's abandoned like this in my other life too. I suppose I'd be the legal owner now, both in this life and the other. My aunt and uncle who raised me could have sold it, possibly, and kept the money, but it's possible they didn't want anything to do with something connected to my parents. They thought it was bad enough they had to let *me* live with them."

She nodded. Harry looked back at Draco, who was also regarding the house. His expression was inscrutable. Harry decided they needed to stop sitting around and start doing something. He opened the car door with his left hand, still not favoring his right, and said, one foot out of the car, "I'll get the tent and the clothes from the boot. Can you get the rest, Draco?"

"Huh?" His best friend turned his head to look at Harry, and he saw a brief flash of red. *Not yet, Riddle*, he thought. *You can't have him yet.* "Oh, right. Yeah, I can do that."

Once he'd retrieved the tent and bag of clothes, Harry looked at the house. At first he'd thought they could set up the tent inside the roofless walls, but now he decided that might not be too smart. If someone came here looking for him, being right inside the house would just make it too easy. He looked at the copse of trees that began about five yards from the house's chimney. "We'll set up the tent just inside those trees. Perhaps ten or twenty feet in. That way we'll be close to it, but we'll have cover."

Draco nodded and followed Harry into the trees. Hermione followed the two of them somewhat aimlessly, watching them set up the tent while nibbling nervously at her fingernails and sometimes twirling a piece of hair between her fingers. When the tent was up, they carried the gear inside. Hermione didn't follow. Harry emerged from the tent after a few minutes.

"Draco's going to have a lie-down, he says. I'll walk you back to the car." She nodded and walked back through the trees with him. They swung their arms while they walked, and when their hands collided, she reached for his, and he remembered when they'd done the same thing on the way

to the hospital wing when Ron had broken his leg in fifth year. They proceeded to the car hand in hand.

Harry opened her door for her and was about to help her in, but she turned to him, standing very close, looking up into his face with a strange expression in her eyes. "Harry," she said softly, "are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

He looked down at her, thinking how comforting she could be, how nice it would be for her to stay....and how dangerous for her if Riddle emerged from the diary and found a "Mudblood" present. It was lucky for her Lucius Malfoy had simply bound her to his stepfather and Charlie instead of killing her on the spot. It was dangerous for him, as well, since Riddle would know he'd lied about quite a lot if she were there.

"I *would* like you to, if I'm being honest," he said, putting his hand on her elbow, "but it wouldn't be safe for you. You need to behave as though everything's going to go on as it has done. You need to pack your bags and fly to America, and buy your mum a birthday card, and make plans for a nice trip to some beach this summer....We don't know whether this is going to work, after all. There's no guarantee. You can't just assume."

She nodded, then slid her arms around his waist, surprising him, and also pillowied her head on his chest. "Goodbye, Harry," she whispered into his shirt. "I'll never forget you."

He wrapped his arms around her, wishing he didn't have to let her go. He was worried about Draco and nervous about Riddle. But that was exactly why he had to make her go. She had to be far away, where she'd be safe. He leaned down and brushed his lips against her cheek, but then she turned her head and he felt far softer skin. Another pair of lips. He drew his head back immediately.

"Harry," she whispered. "It doesn't have to mean that you're not still mourning Ginny. It's just--something I wanted to do before I said goodbye for the last time. Please?"

He looked down at her pleading eyes; she seemed so much more vulnerable in this life than in his other one. She hadn't been hardened by repeated encounters with dark magic in this life. She hadn't been kidnapped by dark wizards in Bulgaria, and she hadn't put up a wall of protection around herself as a result. He gave her a small smile and cupped her cheek in his hand.

"All right. Just a quick kiss." He leaned down and caught those soft lips with his own once more and felt as though he'd traveled through time again as she slowly opened her mouth and he felt her body go liquid in his arms. After an agonized minute, during which he felt like every hair on his body was standing to attention, he tried to pull away gently, but her arms

were locked around his neck firmly. Finally, he had to put up his hands and grasp her wrists and take them from around him.

He stepped back and looked at her. "Maybe--maybe if this doesn't work, I'll come to America, look you up. After going to France, that is."

She smiled. "That would be nice." That's all she said. She entered the car and closed the door, started the car and moved it down the road without once looking at him again. Harry touched his lips with his fingers. Well, he remembered, Hermione always was a good kisser...

He returned to the copse of trees and hesitated before entering the tent. The arboreal world around him was teeming with life; squirrels and foxes ran through the underbrush, birds of all sorts twittered from branch to branch, carrying paraphernalia for building nests. He saw a large spider sitting on a web slung between two thorny bushes, the fine strands glittering with moisture that made it seem like a beautiful jewel. It was a perfect spring day, and he had to go into a tent and wait for Draco to be ready to write in a diary. There was something very wrong here....

When he entered, Draco was already sitting at the table writing. Harry thought, *He should have waited*, but then he realized how exhausted he was and lay down on the bottom bunk where he had thought Draco would be resting. Draco turned his head to look at him.

"Don't you want to see what I'm writing?"

"S'Okay," he said with a tired wave of his hand. "We're here now. I trust you."

Draco still looked at him, then shrugged, turning back to the diary. When Harry awoke much later, they had some lunch, and then Draco spent the afternoon writing in the diary some more. After that they ate dinner, wrote some more, and when it became too dark to see, they went to bed, to conserve energy (the torch was to be used now only for an emergency).

The next day they found a stream about ten minutes walk away which seemed to be in an area where other humans never came. They decided to make this their outdoor bathing room, and Harry was glad to be able to start each day clean again. Now that it was May, the weather wasn't an impediment to washing outdoors. (Unless it rained.)

For three days they rose, bathed, had Draco write in the diary, ate breakfast, lunch and dinner to break up the long bouts of writing, then went to bed when it became too dark to see. Each day Draco looked weaker and weaker. Finally, Harry couldn't take it any more. He had to ask him before it became too late and Draco was too weak to answer.

"Draco," he whispered in the dark on the fourth night, "why don't you try to use Voldemort's wand to do the spell with me? Then when the timeline changes back, you'll remember this life. You'll remember Jamie..."

He heard a choking noise and thought his best friend might be crying.

"But I don't *want* to remember..."

"Draco," he said again, imploringly, "*Why* are you doing this?"

He didn't answer right away. "Doing what?" he finally said. His voice sounded very loud in the dark, somehow.

"Writing in the diary. Sacrificing yourself."

"You know why, Harry. So you can fix the timelines."

"But--what I mean is--" he stammered. "You said you were no friend; that you'd done something awful. And I've thought and thought about it, and I can't for the life of me figure out what could have been so bad."

Draco was silent. "You'll hate me if I tell you," he finally said.

"No I won't. And even if it's as dreadful as you say--you're obviously trying to make up for it."

"No matter what I do, Harry, even *this*, there's never really any making up for it. You don't understand...."

"Then try to *get* me to understand. What were you talking about?"

Silence again. Then Draco's voice, slow and quiet. "My dad was afraid someone would target my mum. Which turned out to be right. He wanted to make sure that if Ginny didn't write in the diary, there'd still be a way to get her and leave me in the clear. So he sent me this egg..."

"An *egg*?"

"Yeah. Supposed to be a basilisk egg. I wasn't too thrilled about that. I mean, what if I was the one there when it hatched? One look and I'd be dead. So I asked my dad how to make sure the thing attacks a particular person instead of *me*, figuring there wouldn't really be a way. But he comes back and says, there *is* a way. He said I had to get some of her hair, bore a small hole in the shell, and put the hair in. The hair would act like a homing device and the creature would zero in on that person if they were anywhere in the vicinity. Of course, it still wouldn't stop the thing from attacking other people--" Harry remembered the merpeople in the lake fighting the creature "--but if the person whose hair was put in the egg was around, it would *definitely* go after that person. Well, I put her

hair in, but as soon as I did, I had second thoughts, and I tried to get it out again. I couldn't. I was afraid to break the egg to get the hair out, in case the thing was really close to being ready to hatch, so I decided to chuck it in the lake and claim to my dad that it broke or was discovered and thrown out or something. I was so relieved to get rid of the stupid thing...."

Harry drew in his breath. "So you--"

Draco sounded like he might be crying. "I was trying to throw it away! Honestly! I never meant for Ginny to be hurt. Like I said, as soon as I'd put her hair in it I decided I had to get rid of it. I thought, *What the hell am I doing? Trying to get my best friend's girl killed?* I didn't know the stupid thing would get--I don't know--stuff in it once it was underwater that would change it into that weird creature you described in the lake. I guess that happened because of the hole I'd already bored in the shell...."

Harry tried to keep his voice steady, unsuccessfully. "Well," he said, his voice wavering, "normally a basilisk's egg is hatched under a hen. Who knows what kind of creature decided to take on the egg once you'd thrown it in the lake? Maybe the squid got all motherly and decided to sit on it until it was ready to hatch."

Draco didn't answer.

"Draco?"

"I'm sorry, Harry, I really am. I never meant for Ginny to be attacked like that...I didn't know that thing would still become a monster..."

"Sssh..." Harry said softly, understanding now. "It's over and done. We're fixing everything. Don't worry. Just--thanks for doing this. Thanks for your help."

Harry waited. Eventually he heard a soft, "You're welcome."

They didn't say anything else that night.

* * * * *

On the sixth night, Harry woke suddenly. Draco hadn't written much that day; he'd felt very, very tired so often in the past two days that he'd probably slept in the bottom bunk more than he'd written.

Now Harry heard someone bang into one of the chairs and swear softly.

"Draco? Is that you?" Silence. "Draco?"

"It's not Draco."

Harry froze, lying in the top bunk. He hadn't heard that voice since his second year of school in his other life, but he had no doubt he knew who had spoken to him. Harry sat up cautiously and swung his legs over the side of the bunk, sliding cautiously to the ground. He slept with both his wand and Voldemort's wand in his pocket, and he took out his wand now, although he didn't light it. Then he thought better of this and put the wand away again before Riddle could see it. He walked cautiously to the table and felt around for the torch, turning it on when he found it.

He wound up shining it directly into Riddle's eyes; the other boy covered his face and yelled, and Harry mumbled an apology and set the torch down on the table, shining upwards, the tent walls reflecting the light. Harry saw Draco lying in his bunk, pale and barely breathing.

"You can open your eyes now," he said, sitting at the table. Riddle uncovered his face and continued to squint at the torch, but he pulled out a chair and sat next to Harry, examining him warily. Harry fought the urge to squirm.

"You're Harry Potter," he said suddenly.

"Yes."

He motioned to the bottom bunk where Draco lay, breathing very, very shallowly. "And that's Draco Malfoy, right?" Harry nodded. "So; you two are trying to make it so I don't get killed by your mum, the Auror. Right?"

"Right."

Riddle nodded. "Where's the wand?"

Cautiously, Harry withdrew the wand from his pocket and laid it on the table. Riddle looked at it and whistled through his teeth.

"That's my wand all right. How'd you get it?"

"When you fell, I hid it at Dover. I pushed it into the ground and covered it with a rock. It wasn't easy getting back there, especially with Aurors, Dea--I mean, with Aurors and Muggle police both looking for me."

"Muggle police?"

"The Ministry told the Muggle Prime Minister I was very dangerous, and he agreed to have Muggles alerted to look for me too. It was on television and the radio...."

Riddle frowned. "What's television? Is that the box with the films in it that Malfoy was telling me about?"

"Oh, he told you about that? Yes. That's not a bad way to describe it."

Riddle picked up the wand with both hands, rolling it between his fingers.
"I've waited so long for this...."

"We didn't want it to be--to be too soon. Before we reached Godric's Hollow. Now that we're here...."

"I know," Riddle interrupted, and Harry started to wonder whether Riddle knew things he didn't *want* him to know.

"Did I ever mention, er girls to you, when I wrote?"

Riddle sat back and smirked at Harry. "You don't remember, do you?"

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "Did I?"

The smirk was still there. "I was--curious. I needed to live vicariously for a bit, after all. I made it so you wouldn't remember afterward, so you wouldn't be embarrassed. No harm done."

"Except that you evidently told Draco about it...."

"No; I didn't."

Harry frowned. "What about--"

"Oh, that. In the girl's flat. The Mudblood. That wasn't Malfoy speaking, not really, although he remembered saying it afterward. That was me. I was able to possess him now and again before attaining this body; it only lasted briefly, though. Very clever to use the Mudblood, by the way. To get here. Did you two shag?"

"No!"

He shrugged. "Pity. She clearly wanted to with *somebody*...." Harry fought the urge to hit him.

"I just did it for fun in my other life," he told Riddle, feeling his stomach lurch as he dismissed Hermione so casually. "I didn't feel like repeating it."

Riddle nodded. "Better to wait until you can find a pureblood girl. I know what you mean." Harry didn't correct him. It didn't matter. He needed the bastard to like him and do what he wanted him to do.

"I told you about needing to change the timelines," he said to Riddle, who nodded.

"Right. Your dad shouldn't have been killed because he was loyal to me, and your mum *should* have because she wasn't. We have to both concentrate on that and say this spell and we'll travel back in time to a moment when that can be taken care of. Well, I'm game. Shall we try it?"

Harry nodded and pushed up his sleeves. Riddle saw the Dark Mark on his left arm. "What's that?" he wanted to know.

"The Dark Mark. You gave it to me when I was initiated. Draco has one, too. It's the mark of all of your servants."

Riddle grinned, very pleased with himself. He held the wand loosely but he gave the impression that it would be very, very hard to pry it from his fingers. He pointed it vaguely in Harry's direction.

"Shall we?"

Harry's breathing grew very shallow. They put their wands together. Harry thought furiously of the night his parents were killed, hoping Riddle was doing the same. He'd told him the date when he'd written in the diary. That reminded him; he picked the diary up from the table, and, clutching the book to him, he took a deep breath before saying the spell. Their two young voices intoned it solemnly together:

Tempus Bonae Voluntatis.

Swirling blackness. A rushing wind in his ears. A disorienting buzzing. Then--

Silence.

He deliberately squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. It was very dark. A half-moon was just beginning to rise; it wasn't high enough in the sky to make it down through the trees, leafless though many of them were, to illuminate the leaf-strewn ground in the copse. Harry looked around, breathless. Draco and the tent were nowhere to be seen. Had it really worked? Had they gone back in time? Was it really Halloween night in 1981?

He swallowed. If it hadn't worked, he'd lost his last chance to fix things. And if it had--he had to get Riddle out of the way as soon as possible.

He looked at the other boy, whose dark eyes darted around the clearing in which they stood, also assessing the situation.

"Malfoy's gone," he noted, as Harry had. "And that tent. I think we did it."

Harry nodded. "Looks that way." How to do it? he thought. Riddle looked quite real, quite solid. He was real enough that he'd done very complex

magic with a wand. *That* was definitely real, Harry thought. He looked down at the book clutched against his chest; and yet--he *wasn't* real. Not truly. He was a memory that had been stored in a book for over fifty years. If he put the killing curse on him, no one would care. It wasn't like killing a real person.

Still--he didn't like the idea of performing that particular curse. What if--what if he just *stunned* him? That would get him out of the way while he did something to prevent his other self from putting Imperius on his mother. That should work.

"Do you know which way we should go?" Riddle asked him suddenly, and then smiled. "After all, we have a mother to kill."

Harry's stomach lurched. The way he said that, so cavalierly....It made his blood run cold. But then he remembered that this boy had loosed the basilisk on the castle, killing poor Myrtle. Already a heartless killer at sixteen. Harry shuddered.

"I'm not sure." He wasn't lying, not completely. He pretended to glance around, when he was actually trying to see what Riddle was doing out of the corner of his eye. Riddle was squinting into the darkness, looking like he was concentrating quite hard. Harry continued to turn his head this way and that, all the while continuing to note Riddle's actions, and surreptitiously removing his wand from his pocket.

"I think it's this way," Riddle said. "I thought I saw a faint light through the trees..."

He turned to tell Harry this, only to be confronted by Harry's wand. A split second later, Harry cried, "*Stupefy!*" and a crackling light zoomed out of his wand. It would have struck Riddle were it not for the fact that at the last second, just as he was pronouncing the final syllable of the spell, his wand jumped to the left, changing the angle ever so slightly so that the spell hit a tree trunk and bounced off harmlessly.

Riddle dropped his jaw, then whipped out his own wand. *What the hell happened?* Harry wondered. He dropped the diary on the ground, balling up his left hand into a fist. The two of them circled each other suspiciously, glaring malevolently.

"It didn't take you long, did it Potter? I already figured out a bit from Malfoy--I knew the two of you weren't being completely honest with me--but perhaps you'd care to tell me why we're *really* here?"

"That's my business."

"Is that so? I think you've *made* it my business. So you don't really want your mother killed?"

"No, I want her killed. Otherwise the spell wouldn't have worked."

Riddle frowned. "Then what?"

"I'm here to prevent someone else from interfering with the timeline. And I also don't want you wandering about in the world, wreaking havoc."

"I thought you were my loyal servant? You had my wand. You have the Mark."

"I stole the wand. And plenty of people have the Mark who don't truly serve you. You never heard of spies?"

Riddle stood still, and so did Harry. "Then it's really your *mother* who's my true servant, and that's why you want her killed?"

"No."

Riddle was looking more and more frustrated. "What then, dammit?"

Harry was tired of talking. He quickly pointed his wand again and cried, "*Expelliarmus!*"

But once more, at the last second, he felt the wand in his hand move over ever so slightly, and the spell missed Riddle by a wide shot. Watching the beam of light shoot past him, Riddle then turned to regard Harry with a smug expression.

"Aim not very good, is it?"

"My aim is fine!" he said with frustration. "Every time--I can feel the wand moving away from you..."

Now Riddle looked absolutely fascinated. "Really?" Harry could see him thinking furiously, then he appeared to have an epiphany, and immediately after, he began laughing uproariously.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" he cried. "I am so clever, you have to admit...."

"What are you talking about?" Harry fumed, gripping his seemingly-useless wand tightly in his fist. How was he going to pull this off if he couldn't use his wand?

Riddle was grinning from ear to ear. "Malfoy told me about the Obedience Charm. I knew which one he meant, too. I discovered it in a dusty book in the Restricted Section of the library at school."

"So?"

"So? I know that *I* put the Obedience Charm on you when you were a baby. Just after sparing your mother's life. Malfoy told me all about it. By doing so, of course, I must have cost myself some power, and must have cost myself a bit more by having already put it on Malfoy when he was a year old. But in spite of that, it has definite advantages...."

Harry swallowed. "But--but you're not the one who actually put the spell on me or Draco. It was you when you were *older*, but--"

Riddle looked very superior. "Hmph! You don't understand anything. Idiot! *I am* the same person. We have the same identity. The same blood and bone. The same brain. We're the *same*." He laughed again. "This is wonderful! You have the Obedience Charm on you, you're subject to me, and I didn't have to give up any power to do it!" he chuckled, making Harry shiver all over.

No, he thought. No no no no no... He had to do whatever Riddle said. *Whatever he said!* If he refused a direct order, he'd drop down dead. If he agreed to follow orders, he would do whatever he'd agreed to, if it was at all possible. He had to do whatever he could to avoid receiving a direct order. He had to try one last time to get rid of Riddle. He couldn't risk Riddle telling him to do something heinous, like the orders Voldemort had given the heir....

He tried to forget his objections to the curse and concentrate on every hateful emotion he could muster and funnel it into his wand; he screwed up his face and pointed his wand at Riddle again, crying fiercely, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry felt his wand arm shaking; he had never felt such power surging through him before. But then, just as when he'd tried the spell to stun Riddle and the spell to disarm him, his wand veered off at the last second. The green light shot from the end of his wand, striking a tree twenty feet away, which promptly turned black and shriveled; all of the leaves which had still been clinging to the branches immediately fell to the ground, and Harry thought he heard a faint cry as of the tree breathing its last. He looked desperately back at Riddle, who hadn't ducked or flinched, but who had stood with his feet shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed, watching Harry with a bemused expression and the edge of his mouth curling up.

"You can try that all night, if you like," he said merrily. "I could pretend you've managed to give me a toothache, if it would make you happy."

Harry was breathing quickly, still clutching his wand. "It's the Obedience Charm, isn't it?"

Riddle threw back his head to laugh. "Oh, we finally figured it out! Of course it's the Obedience Charm, you dolt! You can't put any spell on me that would cause me to be hurt. I was standing near quite a large tree

when you tried to disarm me, for instance, and so I would have hit my head on it if your spell had worked. You can't hurt me, Potter. I'm your master; you're my servant. And there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

That was what Lucius Malfoy had been referring to when Harry stopped him talking about the charm; he had been about to tell him that neither he nor Draco could hurt Voldemort--or, in this case, Tom Riddle.

Harry felt like the world was caving in around him. *Nothing you can do about it.* His mother hadn't known, he was sure, or she would have told him. It made so much sense, of course. What good would an Obedience Charm be if there wasn't some protection from being harmed by the person on whom you'd put the spell? Otherwise you just might be empowering them to kill you.

"Oh, you also can't put Imperius on me. And naturally, Cruciatus is out, since that would hurt me quite a lot. So. Why don't you just come with me, nice and quiet, and we'll see about killing your mother, shall we? And then I can decide what you're going to do for me next. I have a feeling I'm going to enjoy the nineteen-eighties...."

Riddle turned and started walking in the direction in which he'd seen the light. When he failed to hear Harry crunching through the leaves following him, he turned. "Coming Potter? Oh, that's right; I have to give you a direct order. I order you to follow me. Now."

Harry took a deep breath. If he refused, he'd die. If he agreed, he'd follow Riddle anywhere he went. All right, he thought. Nothing wrong with that so far; walking through some trees is just walking through some trees. "Fine," he said bitterly. "I'll follow you."

"Excellent!" Riddle grinned. He turned and strode toward the edge of the copse, and Harry took a step, but he fell when he stepped on something that slid along the ground on some damp leaves; his foot went right out from under him and he landed painfully on his rear. Riddle turned around now, surveying him with distaste. "Stupid--" he mumbled, upon seeing Harry sprawled awkwardly on the loamy ground; then he turned his face toward the cottage again. Harry started to get up, but then he saw that it was the diary that had made him fall. He'd stepped on it and slid--

His brain lit up with an idea.

He watched Riddle's retreating back, feeling an incredible urge to follow him. *It's just the charm*, he reminded himself. He picked up the diary again and rose to his feet once more, jogging slightly to catch up. When he was finally only about ten feet from Riddle, he threw the diary onto the ground in a spot that was devoid of leaves; just packed earth with a slightly damp smell. Riddle turned when he heard the *slap!* of the book

hitting the ground, but he didn't realize what was happening until Harry was done uttering his incantation. Harry's wand did not waver this time; he hit his mark sure and true.

"*Incendio!*" he cried, pointing his wand at the diary. The small book immediately burst into flames. *I'm not putting a spell on Riddle*, he thought with satisfaction. *I'm putting the spell on a book.*

"*Noooo!*" Riddle cried, trying to lunge for the burning book, but in moments he was too insubstantial to do this, and Harry blinked, seeing a wispy, ghostly figure of Tom Riddle one moment, and absolutely nothing the next. His cry died on the still night air. Voldemort's wand clattered to the ground.

Harry sat down breathlessly, wanting to cry tears of joy. He watched the book burn itself out. At last, the final orange glow had faded and there was nothing but a pile of ashes where the diary of T.M. Riddle had been.

He looked up; now he could also see light through the trees. Although he felt exhilarated by his victory, he couldn't rest; he still had work to do, and he had to hope that no one had heard Riddle's cry as the diary burned and the bond between book and boy was broken.

Harry crept through the trees until he had a view of the side of the cottage. He saw two figures there, himself and Voldemort. His other self was peering in the high window next to the chimney, and Harry knew that he was seeing his father in an armchair, his feet up, doing a crossword puzzle in the *Daily Prophet*, and his mother lying on the couch on the other side of the hearth, reading a book with one hand protectively on her slightly rounded belly.

Jamie, he thought for a moment. *That's Jamie inside her, this very instant.*

He shook his head. He couldn't think about that. If he didn't change the timelines back, Jamie still wouldn't exist. Thinking about the fact that he had to let Voldemort kill his mother *and* his sister wasn't going to do any good. He had to make sure events unfolded this evening as they had the first time, when his family members were *all* killed--his mother, his father *and* his sister. He had known Jamie for fifteen years and had some wonderful memories of her. That was more than he'd had last September when he'd come here for the first time. It would have to be enough.

He watched himself step back from the window and turn to the dark wizard, saying something inaudible from where he was in the trees. *He's asking whether he can save them both*, he remembered. *Or rather, I'm asking...*

The other Harry looked in the window again, then said something else to Voldemort. Voldemort looked up at the sky, then he saw Voldemort's lips move as he answered his other self.

The pair went to the front garden; Voldemort stationed himself behind a tall, dark tree that hid him from the house perfectly, and the other Harry crouched behind the rose bush near the tree. He had to be very, very careful. He thought about what Riddle had said about the Obedience Charm. What spell could he put on Voldemort to keep him from interfering that wouldn't be repelled by the charm? Stunning him wouldn't work, he already knew. The charm didn't like that one. It might not do much good to make him feel like he was hanging upside down in mid-air; knowing Voldemort, he'd still probably be able to cope. (Harry remembered Aberforth teaching him to do this when he had been taking Professor Flitwick's place.) And technically, they couldn't duel. Harry had to make sure whatever he did was something that caught him unawares. If the magic from their two wands actually collided, they would experience the strange golden web of light again, which would undoubtedly draw attention to them and cause his parents to come outside and destroy all hope of replicating the original timeline.

He wished he'd known about this aspect of the Obedience Charm! Whatever he chose to do, it had to be unobtrusive enough to get past the Obedience Charm and yet serve to incapacitate Voldemort....If only he dared use the *Tempus Fugit* spell, then he'd be moving much faster than Voldemort, and--

Suddenly, he lit on the solution, and he smiled. It was the next best thing. Rather than making himself move many, many times *faster* than Voldemort, he would fix it so that Voldemort was moving many, many times *slower*. It was just innocuous enough that it was possible the Obedience Charm would let it through.

He crept through the trees and silently approached the fence around the garden. The tall thin wizard and his other self were just inside the fence. Harry pointed his wand and said softly, "*Impedimenta!*"

His other self turned, his eyes widening in shock; he pulled out his wand and uttered an incantation that was too soft to hear. Harry remembered Hermione talking about people who'd fooled around with Time Turners, people who'd killed their future selves out of confusion and panic. He leapt out of the way of the spell, then pointed his wand at his other self and quickly said, "*Stupefy!*" watching in amazement as the other Harry fell over.

He approached the fence with caution, shying away from the statue-like Voldemort whose face registered no reaction; he still seemed to be waiting placidly for *his* other self to appear and try to kill Harry's father and mother. He saw that the stunned Harry from September first still had

his wand clutched in his right hand. He aimed his wand at him and said quietly, "*Mobilicorpus*," guiding his own body up and over the fence, then into the copse of trees a good distance, so that they couldn't see the cottage. Harry knew what was going to happen, and he'd already seen it partly, once in Snape's Pensieve and once on the previous September first.

When he felt they had gone far enough into the trees, he let the levitating body sink to the ground. He had been seen, and he had tried to attack himself. If he revived his other self, would it be safe? Just to be certain, he took the wand out of the stiff fingers, pulling his hand away as soon as possible; there was just something too eerie about touching his own fingers and arm, a self that had traveled here from another time and created the reality in which he'd been living....

He sat down on the dead leaves and stared at his own face in repose. There was the scar, the scar he would receive in just a little while, once Voldemort killed his parents and attempted to kill him. The scar he'd always hated, which had given him nightmares and horrible radiating pain. The scar he now wished he *had* with every fiber of his being. He swallowed and cautiously pointed his wand at the prone figure, whispering the word.

"*Ennervate.*"

The other Harry blinked, looking up at the dark canopy of trees; faint moonlight now filtered down to where they were and Harry could see that his other self was frightened and unsure of what to think. He was convinced of this because he knew that was how he would feel and, well, this was him, after all.

The scarred Harry sat up slowly, staring at the scarless Harry, who saw in the green eyes looking back at him something which others had seen before and which he had not; the look of Harry Potter thinking about how to handle the situation he was in, the wheels of his brain turning swiftly, calculating, running through his list of options. It was a rather frightening look, he thought, secretly wondering if that was something else that had helped him succeed in becoming the captain of the Dueling Club. Somehow, he thought, one just didn't want to know what was going to happen after a person looked like they were thinking *that* intently about how to hurt you or outsmart you.

"Don't be alarmed," he said quickly. "Please just listen to what I have to say." The other Harry glared at him. He did not look trusting. "Who are you?" he said simply. Harry's first reaction was that he sounded rather stilted and upper-crust. A bit posh. Then he realized that it was the English, rather than Scottish, accent. Is that what I used to sound like? he thought. Andy MacRae was the first one who'd called his Scottish accent

to his attention, but since then he'd quite forgotten he'd ever sounded like anything else.

Grasping a wand in each hand, he swallowed. "I'm you. If you change the timelines, I'm you. Actually, you *did* change the timelines. You did it once, anyway, last September. I've lived in another world, in another reality since then. Or rather, you have. Or rather, I've lived in it for the last fifteen-and-a-half years. But--it's wrong. And it's been very hard for me to manage to get back here, but now I am, and it's very important that you let things play out tonight as they did the first time, when both of your--parents were killed," he stammered awkwardly. "It all has to go back. All of the things that have happened in the new timeline....It's all wrong. None of it should ever have been. I know it seemed--" his voice caught "--it seemed like you were saving a life. Saving your mother's and your sister's lives, that is. But--but you just have to accept that they're gone."

His other self still did not look trusting. He nodded at the wands. "You have my wand," he said stiffly in his Surrey accent.

"Yes, well--you tried to attack me back there by the cottage. I couldn't take any chances. Will you please listen to me for a minute? Then I'll give it back to you, I promise."

He reached up and touched the scar on his forehead, then looked at the smooth forehead of the person confronting him. "You don't have a scar," he said softly. "And you sound strange."

He touched his smooth forehead. "When mum wasn't killed by Voldemort, it was because she promised me to him. He put an Obedience Charm on me. He put it on Draco Malfoy, too. And we lived in Hogsmeade. I grew up there, so I sound Scottish."

The scarred Harry nodded, looked a little less like he was scheming. "I--I wanted to tell him no. I really did. But when he said Mum had been expecting a baby--"

"I know, I know," he said softly to his other self. "And Jamie was a wonderful sister...."

"Jamie?" his other self said wistfully.

"Mum named her after our father."

"Then--then how can you just let her *and* Mum die out there?" he demanded, his voice going up.

"Sssh! Because--" Should he tell him? He took a deep breath. "Because they're already dead. And there's more bad besides that, things that

aren't just about *my* life. The world is--well, I won't tell you right now. When the day comes, sometime in May, that I come back to your world, you'll remember everything then. I think it's better that you don't know right now. Maybe you'll have something like a normal time in school this year..."

The other Harry smirked. "Normal. What's that?"

He smiled in agreement. Indeed; for Harry Potter, what *was* a normal year in school? A year when Voldemort wasn't living under a professor's turban or a basilisk wasn't being released from a secret chamber? A year when dementors weren't all round the castle or there wasn't a magic tournament? A year when black-trimmed owl post wasn't being delivered to students every five minutes, recruiting more and more Death Eaters, and a year when numerous girls weren't placed under Imperius and ordered to pursue him? What was "normal" for *him*?

He watched himself push up his glasses and rub his eyes, fighting the impulse to do the same thing. Watching him do this was rather eerie. He watched the other Harry settle his glasses on his nose again, then run his fingers over his scar for a second. "What now?" he asked.

"Now," he told the scarred Harry, "we wait. With no interference, everything should be as it was before. We have to stay out of the way and wait for everything that's supposed to happen."

The other boy looked down, then up again. "I'm sorry. Has it been rough?"

In response, he pulled up his left sleeve, revealing the mark. He heard a hiss as the other Harry drew his breath in sharply.

"When?"

"Winter solstice. Draco at the same time."

"You call him Draco?"

"We're both in Slytherin. We've been best friends since we were wee."

"Wee?" The other boy smiled. Harry grimaced; the Scottishness was coming through more than he'd intended. "Best friends, huh? Well, I suppose Mrs. Figg didn't need to put memory charms on the two of you."

"No; but I'm used to calling her Nanny Bella here."

The other Harry shook his head. "This is so strange. And in a few months--"

"More than eight, actually."

"In about eight months, I'm suddenly going to remember all this?"

He nodded. "On September first, I suddenly found myself in my bedroom in Hogsmeade with fifteen years worth of memories. They were a little hard to get at, at the beginning, but eventually it became easier. You might want to ask Sirius for your own Pensieve, just to get ready for May. It might be easier in the long run, to put some of this life in a sort of separate place. But a place where you could still--experience the memories."

The other Harry nodded. "All right. I'll do that."

They were both silent for a while, listening to the wind in the trees and the small animals scampering over and under the leaves. He saw his other self reach for the basilisk pendant and finger it lightly, and he remembered he had one too, and did the same. The metal was warm again! He held it tightly, and closed his eyes, seeing Mrs. Weasley, looking much the same but just a little younger, holding a squirming red-haired bundle on her lap, wrapped in a towel. The baby was pink and clean, fresh from her bath; Harry had no doubt at all that it was Ginny. How old would she be today? He thought about it; tomorrow, she'd be seven months old. He smiled at the image of the mother and baby. He opened his eyes and saw that the other Harry was also smiling while holding the pendant. What was *he* seeing, he wondered?

At length, the other Harry opened his eyes and said, "*Slytherin?*"

He was startled. "What?"

"You said you--I mean we--I mean--" his other self sighed, trying to get a handle on the pronoun situation. "Slytherin. You said Slytherin. How did *that* happen?"

He shrugged. "They sort the M's before the P's. Draco went into Slytherin, and he's my best friend, so I wanted to be there too. The hat gave me sort of a choice."

"Again?"

"Yes. And I also wanted to be in Slytherin because my da--" He stopped himself suddenly. How strange would that be, to find out that Snape was his stepfather? Or at least, to find out like this? "Er," he said, trying to recover. "There were other reasons, too."

"What did Ron think of that? And Hermione? They're still your--our--friends, right?"

He grimaced. "Ron didn't think very much of me in this life. I'm a Slytherin, after all. He's a Gryffindor prefect. If we weren't going to destroy this reality, he'd probably would have been Head Boy next year." And if he weren't hiding out in France, he thought. "And Hermione..."

"She's not my friend either?"

"Oh, you could say she's my friend..." he hedged, furrowing his brow.

"Is she in Ravenclaw?"

"Ravenclaw? Er, no. Listen, I don't think I should tell you any more. Too much has happened in the last fifteen years for me to be able to just *tell* you about it. It'll be easier when you can just access the memories yourself. I'm afraid I'll tell everything out of order and confuse you...."

They were silent again, and each reached instinctively for his basilisk amulet. Suddenly the other Harry looked up and noticed that he was holding something too, and he asked, "What's that you've got there?" Harry opened his hand and showed it to him silently. "Where did you get it?"

He laughed. "If I told you, you wouldn't believe it. I noticed you were smiling when you held it. Did you--see anything?"

His other self looked surprised. "Yeah, I did. Usually I just feel sort of calm and comforted, but this time I saw something. I never did before. It was very faint...."

"Was it Mrs. Weasley? With a baby?"

Harry watched his own jaw drop. "Yes!"

He nodded. "I saw the same thing, but mine wasn't faint. It was very clear." Suddenly, he had an impulse, and he took off the amulet, holding it out. "Take it. Here."

His other self hesitated, then reached out for it, making sure their hands did not touch. He looked up into the face of the scarless Harry. "Why?"

"Just--if you manage to make it back with it, give it to someone else."

"Who?"

He hesitated. "I can't tell you that. You have to decide. But you'll know when the time is right."

He held up the amulet that had been resting on his sternum and compared the two. "They're identical."

"No, they're not. They're actually *the same amulet*. There's only one in each world. That's why I'm not sure you can take that one back, but it's worth a try."

His other self was still staring in fascination at the second amulet. Then he pocketed it. "You need to give me something else," he said.

"Oh; right." He handed the wand back to himself, which was also pocketed. They turned their faces toward the cottage in unison, ever so subtly holding their breaths, waiting, waiting....

When it finally happened, they both jumped. They heard James Potter shouting his wife's name and his son's name, too. They began creeping cautiously through the trees. "Do *nothing*," he told his other self, who nodded. They reached the edge of the trees; they could see the side of the cottage where the chimney was, and they could dimly make out the figure of Voldemort, still under the Impediment Curse. They saw the front door fly open and Lily Potter run into the garden in her night dress, carrying the baby, who was crying non-stop. He heard his father scream as he was being tortured and instinctively covered his ears; he looked up and saw that his other self was doing the same.

His mother had stopped upon hearing her husband being tortured. The green light flashed in the window of the cottage, they heard the sound of speeding death....

Harry knew it was coming, but still he jumped when the explosion erupted and sent the roof flying into the air. Voldemort stepped purposefully out the front door of the house. Flames were clearly visible through the windows flanking the chimney, and when Harry felt something squeeze his wrist, he was surprised; it was his other self, tensely gripping his arm as he stared at the flames, tears running down his face. He set his jaw, trying not to start crying too, finding it very hard to look away from the scar on that other forehead. He'd never *really* seen himself as others saw him. It was very, very strange.

His mother pleaded with the dark wizard, "*Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry*," and he called her a silly girl and told her to stand aside. She sank to her knees. Harry waited for her next words. She needed to say them, or the timeline wouldn't be fixed. He watched, his heart in his throat, waiting, waiting....

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead--"

Then Harry had a sudden thought: What if *together* we did it? What if we killed him?

But then he remembered: he couldn't do it, because he was subject to the Obedience Charm. Only the other Harry could do it. But *could* he? Others

had obviously tried, with no success. It was only the power of Voldemort's own curse, rebounding on him, that even came *close* to defeating him, and even then he wasn't completely killed.

No, Harry thought. *No more changing things. Everything is to go back to how it was.* He looked at his other self and tried not to wince as the grip on his wrist became tighter and tighter.

He looked up just in time to see it happen; the green flash and the sound of speeding death filled his eyes and ears; he winced and closed his eyes, for only a moment, he thought, but when he opened them again, she was dead, lying at the madman's feet, a pile of white nightgown, as though a mannequin in a shop had fallen over; there was no more life in her than that.

The baby sat next to his mother, seeming stunned. Baby Harry looked down at the fallen woman, then up at the tall figure before him. Harry was waiting for him to cry, but he did not; he calmly regarded his parents' murderer as though he knew he was safe now that his mother had sacrificed her life for him.

He forced himself to keep his eyes open, so he could see it, *really* see it. The terrible words were uttered and the screaming green flash raced once more from the dark wand, pointing right at the tot's face. Then the baby was seized with an unearthly tremor and a glow emanated from him which was so bright as to be almost blinding; both Harrys shielded their eyes against the light coming from their younger self. The baby's body seemed to be absorbing the curse and assimilating it, then drawing on some core of power in him, altering it and sending it back along the crackling green arc of light connecting the wizard's wand to the child.

They could see Voldemort's arm shaking uncontrollably as the curse went through the wand and then his arm--this was when he was uttering the other-worldly scream that Harry and Hermione had heard in Snape's Pensieve, and as both Harrys heard this again, their hands went instinctively to their ears, covering them in vain, as the sound went on and on, a death cry more horrible than any in the universe, because it came from someone who had thought he could never die. His entire body seemed to be vibrating so fast that it must surely dissolve into its individual atoms. And then--that was very close to what happened. His tall, thin body seemed to lose corporeal mass and his wand dropped to the ground. Harry could see through him now, and while he seemed at first to be a grey ghost of the same size and shape as the terrible wizard who had just killed his parents, he very quickly dwindled down to a cat-sized cloud of smoke which flew up into the air, then blew over the trees where they lurked, still wailing that terrible cry, worse than any banshee, but finally receding with distance until it was no longer in their heads, and they dared to uncover their ears.

All was still.

Little Harry now had the scar; it was dripping a thin ribbon of blood onto his nose. He stood uncertainly, looking down at his mother and then looking in the direction of the front door of the cottage. Suddenly, a figure appeared in the road without warning, and he jumped in surprise, then started crying piteously from the shock, as he hadn't when his mother was killed and he had been under attack by Voldemort.

A small young man had Apparated in the road about thirty feet away from the garden gate, then began to run frantically toward the cottage. Harry had thought, when he was here on September first, that he was hearing Snape's running feet, but now he knew that it was this man. When he and Hermione had been in the Pensieve, they had reached the cottage at about the same time as Snape, but all of them had apparently arrived after this man, whom none of them had seen. He didn't notice the tall still figure in the shadows near the tree by the fence; the figure blended in with the tree very thoroughly, it was so tall and thin and so still.

The man was very awkward, stumbling up the garden path and coming to stand next to the child; despite his thinning hair, he was probably no more than twenty-one or twenty-two. He looked around in wonder, down at the body of Lily Evans Potter, at the crying child with the bleeding scar. Then he stooped, picking up something which Harry recognized very well.

The wand.

Peter Pettigrew pocketed his master's wand, then vanished. And yet he didn't. Harry saw that a medium-sized rat emerged through the slats of the fence. It went toward the back of the cottage, and then ran easily across the moon-dappled field behind the Potter place toward a spinney on the next rise of ground, disappearing into the darkness of the trees.

Then Harry heard the second set of running footsteps, and saw Severus Snape coming down from the moors, where he'd just suffered the Cruciatus Curse at the hands of Barty Crouch, Jr. The tall thin man ran through the garden gate and went to his knees by the side of his beloved Lily, taking her in his arms; Harry was having a hard time not crying again. There was no way around it; in both of his lives, Severus Snape was doomed to hold the body of his dead Lily, still almost warm with life, keening and mourning over her, lamenting that they would never grow old together....

Then Harry looked up, startled. The Voldemort who was under the Impediment Curse was gone. Was he going to do something? Had the spell slowing him down worn off? Harry knew it wasn't permanent. (He and Ron hadn't really needed to take the spell off Crabbe and Goyle that time in the entrance hall). Then he turned to comment on this to the Harry who'd been standing beside him, and found that he was gone too.

He turned around frantically, as though he just hadn't looked hard enough for his other self. What was going on? he wondered. He looked over toward the cottage again; Snape and the baby were as he remembered them. Then suddenly he felt as though a rug on which he'd been standing had been pulled out from underneath him quite violently, and he felt himself falling, falling, falling, falling.....

Chapter Eighteen

The Search for Snape

...Falling, falling, falling....

He tumbled through space, through blackness. His mind cried out through the void, *Help me!*

But was there anyone to hear him? Why did he still see blackness? Had he changed the timelines back only to discover that he, Harry Potter, had died in the meantime? Was he tumbling from life in one reality to death in another?

But then he felt something solid under him, and he groaned with pain. He suddenly realized that he *had* a body, and he tried unsuccessfully to sit up; he wanted to rub the back of his head but he couldn't. *He had a body.* A body that *hurt*. Or rather, a head that hurt. Then there was a very strange sensation, like oddly soft sandpaper rubbing on his earlobe. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. The world didn't come into focus right away. He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows. Finally, he saw a fire burning in a grate, and on a keystone at the top of the fireplace arch, he saw what appeared to be a rampant lion. He knew, of course, that it was really a golden griffin without its wings spread. He turned and saw to his left the thin, long-nosed, freckled and red-bearded face of Ron Weasley, with a concern there that started to evaporate as he saw that Harry was all right. To his right was a person he'd seen only a little while before, her hair considerably shorter and more in control, but her shining brown eyes were the same, and her relieved smile.

The sandpapery feeling had come from his being licked by a small cat sitting next to him, looking oddly concerned, in her way, like Ron and Hermione. She had fluffy silver and black striped fur with markings around the eyes as though she had spectacles. She was too large to be a kitten, but as cats went, she was still rather small. *Is that Argent?* he thought. Harry was sitting on the floor, and there were a number of chess pieces scattered on the hearthrug around his legs. He saw the board nearby. He and Ron must have been playing chess. The pieces were pacing around restlessly now, and the white queen--Harry didn't know if it was his or Ron's--was glaring at him with her fists on her hips.

Harry looked back and forth between Ron and Hermione. They were both wearing black Hogwarts robes. Ron's were open, revealing a wrinkled white shirt ornamented with cat hair and buttoned wrong, and faded jeans and brown shoes that were very old; the leather was cracked and worn across the toes. His apprehension leaving him, Harry felt a grin creep across his face, then cried, "Ron!" Unable to contain himself any longer, he launched himself at the amazed boy, throwing his arms around him and feeling like he would weep. Ron disentangled himself from him rapidly, sputtering.

"Harry! Are you all right? Did you hit your head?"

But Harry wasn't listening to him. He turned to Hermione. "You're at Hogwarts!" he told her needlessly. He looked down at his own black Hogwarts robes, seeing the silver badge there. Then, pointing at *her* prefect's badge, he choked with emotion. "And you're a prefect!" He threw his arms around her now, and after a moment's hesitation, she returned the embrace awkwardly.

"Um, Harry, perhaps you should go to see Madam Pomfrey. You really don't look well, you suddenly fell backward and looked like you were having a fit, and now you're saying the queerest things--"

He pulled back from her, grinning. "But--but you don't understand! I've never felt better in my life!" He'd done it. He'd done it! *He'd done it!* He felt a giddiness bubbling up from inside him, as he looked around at the Gryffindor common room. The same tapestries hung on the walls, the same overstuffed red armchairs were scattered about, the same large tables for schoolwork that were invariably used for Exploding Snap instead. His eyes lit on Neville, sitting in a corner looking like he'd been leaning over Trevor's terrarium which Harry remembered he'd received for his sixteenth--or his fourth, depending how you looked at it--birthday. He peered at Harry curiously, as though he was nervous of coming closer.

"And there's Neville!" he cried happily. "And Dean and Seamus!" he said, nodding at the boys, who were sitting in adjacent armchairs looking at a Quidditch magazine together. They too looked as though they had stopped this activity to gawk at him. "And Will and Jamaica!" he added; the second year students were sitting very close together at a table, heads bent over a thick book, and he noticed that Dean was surreptitiously keeping an eye on the pair of them as they worked. They had apparently not noticed his "fit" as his dorm mates had. He continued to look around the room, seeing Zoey and Annika and Ruth, who were talking about their upcoming O.W.L.s. He ran to their table and leaned on it.

"Ruth!" he said excitedly. "What--what did you do about Passover this year?"

She frowned and looked up at him, startled. "My--my family had a sort of early seder for me during the school's Easter holiday. Since Hogwarts doesn't take Jewish holidays into consideration, that's what we've done since I started here. Except for the times when Passover *has* actually occurred during the Easter holiday. Why on earth are you asking?"

"Well, I think that next year, we should have a seder with you here in Gryffindor Tower. At the right time. Next year would be an Ashkenazy seder for your family, right? Since you had a Sephardic one this year?"

Now she looked frightened. "I'd--I'd really rather you didn't. And how did you--"

But he was spinning around looking all about the room, searching, searching....

"Ginny!" he said suddenly, then turned back to her dorm mates. "Where's Ginny? She's all right, isn't she?" His heart was thudding painfully in his chest. He thought about what Dumbledore had said, that anything might have happened in the last eight-and-a-half months....

Zoey nodded dumbly and looked at him as though he were quite unbalanced. "She just went up to our dorm to get some transfiguration notes. We're in the middle of O.W.L. revision here..."

"Dorm!" he said briskly. "Right!"

He sprinted up the stairs to the girls' dorms, feeling a power in his legs he'd missed; he must have been keeping up with his morning runs, he thought. That's good. He felt strong and fit and more *alive* than he had in ages. All was right with the world. He was a Gryffindor, Ron and Hermione were his best friends, and Ginny was all right!

He flung open the door to the dorm for the fifth-year girls, startling her. She was sorting through curling yellow parchments, scattered all over her bed, but she stood when she saw him, her brow furrowed. He closed the door and strode over to her, grinning, unable to contain his happiness at seeing her, at seeing her messy red hair and her wide brown eyes, at seeing every freckle and every inch of her tall, gangly frame. He wasn't as tall as he'd been in his other life, but she had stopped growing the previous year and he had not, so now he was about an inch taller than her. She had a questioning look on her face as he pulled her into his arms, running his eyes over her dear, dear face in amazement, and then he cradled her cheeks between his palms, shaking his head in wonder.

"You're all right," he choked, the tears in his eyes starting to make his vision bleary. He felt like his heart would burst. "You're all right...." he repeated over and over.

She stood stiff as a statue, not pushing him away, not responding except by frowning, a perplexed look frozen on her face. And then he pulled her to him and lowered his mouth to hers, unable to refrain from this for a second longer. She was still like a life-sized doll in his arms, unresponsive and limp. Then, as when he'd bidden her goodbye in the caretaker's office in his other life, he kissed both cheeks, her brow, the tip of her nose, the orbits under her brows....He pulled back, staring into her amazed face again, unsure whether to laugh or cry. "Oh, Ginny," he whispered, feeling like he might start doing both simultaneously. "Do you have *any* idea how much I love you?"

Her eyes opened even wider upon hearing this, her jaw dropped in shock, and he pulled her to him again, moving his arms across her back and one hand up to her head, laced into her hair, and, taking advantage of the surprised open mouth (as she had once done with him), he pushed his tongue gently and slowly between her lips, something he hadn't done after the Quidditch match in his fifth year. She shivered in his arms, coming to life at last, suddenly moving of her own accord instead of *being* moved, like a marionette. She gasped against his mouth and welcomed him in, twining her hands into his hair, holding his mouth in place as she softened and molded her body to his.

He exulted in the solid, warm reality of her; joy sang through every bone in his body. This was Ginny at last, in his arms, *alive*. Safe and alive....

...and she was kissing him back.

For half a minute.

Suddenly, she seemed to come to her senses and pulled away from him. Harry grinned at her happily, his mouth tingling, his heart singing and his mind screaming, *She's alive! She's alive!*

But Ginny had continued to back away from him, her hand covering her mouth in horror, and as he slowly came to realize that she was nowhere as glad to seem him as he was to see her, she started to shake her head, her chest heaving, her eyes round.

"No, no, no, *no*, Harry! We've been over this! You have to stop! You can't just come up to me and start--start *kissing* me and--and *saying* those things....You *can't*! I thought you understood; the last time we talked about this you seemed to understand...."

He furrowed his brow. *He'd said these things to her before today? In this life?*

"But--but Ginny," he stammered, extremely confused.

"No buts, Harry. Nothing has changed. I am with Draco and you are with Hermione. We can't--we can't just--just give in to--"

He stepped toward her so that they were standing very close again. He looked down at her earnestly. "To love?" he whispered.

"Yes! No!" she corrected herself quickly. "I mean--you can't just suddenly decide that--that you want to turn back the clock! It doesn't work that way! You can't just go back through time and say, 'All right, I want to take this path instead--' and rewrite history. Too much has happened...."

He furrowed his brow. "Just because a person has started down the wrong path they can't change it? Fix it? Look at--look at Professor Snape. He was a Death Eater. He returned to Dumbledore's side. How can you say it's impossible?"

Now she looked even more horrified, backing up still more until the mattress of her bed pushing at the backs of her knees forced her to sit abruptly. "Oh, Harry! How can you just--just *casually* talk about poor Professor Snape that way?"

Poor Professor Snape? What had happened to Snape?

"I'm--I'm sorry Ginny," he said awkwardly, backing up himself now. "I--it's just that I--I had this dream. A very vivid dream. And you--you--"

She flushed. "Harry. If I was in a dream you had, I *don't* think you should be telling me about it..."

He widened his eyes when he realized after a moment what kind of dream she thought he meant. "No! I--I don't mean that kind of dream. I--I dreamt that you were--" He couldn't say it.

"Yes?" She actually looked somewhat curious now.

"Um--I dreamt that you were--dead," he said finally, very softly. "And it seemed so *real*. I was so afraid--afraid that it was real--" he stammered, hoping this would make up for so summarily barging into her room and presumptively kissing her and telling her he loved her. She covered her mouth again.

"Oh, Harry. I--I don't know what to say..."

"Just--just say you forgive me and you'll forget all about this Ginny. My--my head doesn't feel quite right, frankly. Maybe I should go see Madam Pomfrey..."

"Is it your scar?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Maybe you *should* go to see Madam Pomfrey. It never hurts to play it safe."

He turned, then whirled and exclaimed, "Not that I'm saying a person has to be not quite right in the head to want to kiss you and--"

"Harry!" she said, laughing, and his heart was doing somersaults, hearing that laugh for the first time in what seemed to be a lifetime without it. "I didn't think you meant *that*. Just *go see Madam Pomfrey*. Maybe she can give you a draught of something so you'll have a dreamless sleep."

He nodded. "Yes. That's probably all I need." He put his hand on the doorknob and turned to her again. "Thanks, Ginny."

She smiled ruefully. "Don't worry about it." Her voice was very soft.

In the short corridor between the top of the steps to the lower floor and the steps leading up to the next level, he paused. He knew he shouldn't have done that, that he shouldn't have flown off the handle and run around Gryffindor Tower like a madman--but he was just *so glad* to know that she was alive, and to hold her, and hear her voice and her laughter....And when she had kissed him back....

He looked at the closed door, then turned to the steps. After going down only two he stopped and sat down on one of the broad stone treads, his head in his hands. Maybe he *should* go to Madam Pomfrey. Ron and Hermione had said they thought he'd hit his head. Perhaps he *had*. He rose again and started walking down the stairs very slowly. When he reached the common room again, Hermione and Ron were finishing putting the chess pieces away in their velveteen-lined box, and they came over to him, both looking very concerned.

"Are you well, Harry?" Hermione asked, putting her hand on his forehead solicitously. He removed it gently but firmly.

"I just need a lie-down," he said, his voice wavering. "I'll be fine...."

"You're sure?" Ron asked, and Harry could have hugged him again, very hard; it was so wonderful to know that Ron was his friend again, that he *cared* what happened to him instead of wanting to throttle him for snogging his sister--

--oh, wait, Harry thought, remembering. I *was* just snogging his sister. And he probably wouldn't be thrilled about that....

....although he might prefer it to Draco Malfoy.

Draco.

Malfoy.

He'd put his father in prison for Ginny's sake. In the tent in Godric's Hollow, he'd sacrificed himself for Harry's sake--for the sake of the *world*. And now he, Harry, had returned to Gryffindor Tower and swooped in and started kissing his girlfriend....

His stomach clenched, and not in a good way. He felt like the world's worst person....

"Are you sure you shouldn't go see Madam Pomfrey, Harry?" Hermione said again, frowning. "You look positively *green*."

He shook himself. "Just--just a lie-down, like I said. I'll be fine; really. Just come up and get me when it's time to eat..."

Then he knew he'd said the wrong thing again, because Ron and Hermione were exchanging a concerned look once more. "Um--you mean when it's time for breakfast?" Ron said. "Because it's almost nine o'clock. We've had the last meal today, and I'll be in the dorm with the others when it's morning," Ron said, looking like he might bodily cart Harry off to the hospital wing any second.

Harry nodded. "Right, right. I meant--" but he looked at their concerned faces, afraid to put his foot in it again. "Never mind," he amended himself. "I'll just go up to bed early. I need the rest."

He turned to look at them for a second after he had gone up the boys' staircase a few steps; they were still looking at him with concern. He remembered the picture of the three of them that Colin had taken, the one he and Ron had given Hermione for her fifteenth birthday, and then he thought of the photograph of him and Jamie and Draco which had been on his mantel at Hog's End. *Jamie*... He continued up the steps, his feet on autopilot, and soon he was opening the door to the sixth-year boys' dorm and throwing himself on the crimson coverlet on his four-poster. He looked down at the deep red color, the color of Gryffindor House. He'd wanted to be back here for so long, and now all he could think of was the people he'd lost forever in that other life....

Jamie....

My brothers....

Mum....

And a stepfather who had always been there for him, who had waited for him, day in and day out, to come to Dover, who had delayed going to

France, where he'd be safe, because he had to look out for *him*, Harry. Where was he now? In this life? What had happened to Severus Snape? He needed to rest now, but he knew that when he awoke, that was the question that needed to occupy all of his consciousness....

What on earth had happened to Snape?

* * * * *

When he awoke, the dorm was dark and he could hear snoring coming from the other beds. He lay listening to the peaceful, familiar sound through the curtains of his four-poster. Ron's snores blended in with the others'. He smiled to himself. He and Ron had made up. When? he wondered. He closed his eyes again, trying to think back to the autumn term....

During the first two weeks of the new term Harry and Ron did not speak to each other except when absolutely necessary. Ron had come to him with an idea for a birthday present for Hermione, and Harry had agreed that it was a good idea and figured out how to get it to her, but otherwise, they almost never spoke to each other. Harry was getting tired of it, feeling like he was walking on eggshells all of the time. The fact that Hermione had been completely overwhelmed by her present, and that it had been Ron's idea, grated on Harry for no reason he could understand. Finally, at the beginning of the third week of classes, Ron came over to Harry in the common room one evening and practically made him jump out of his skin by speaking to him suddenly.

"Where does she go?" he said in a whisper that only Harry could hear.

Harry looked up at him, frowning. Ron was talking to him? But then, he realized, he shouldn't really be surprised. The only reason he spoke to Harry these days was Hermione. This was no exception. He hesitated to answer, but then his curiosity got the better of him. "I dunno. Er--who?" he added, as though he didn't know perfectly well.

"Hermione. Every night after dinner, she disappears. She hasn't told you where she's going?"

Harry closed Quidditch Through the Ages, which he'd been rereading yet again. He shrugged, trying to look unconcerned, although Ron was making him curious now. He fought against showing this. "I just figured it was the library. You know Hermione. Are you sure it's every night?"

"Yeah. You're not very observant, considering she's your girlfriend." Harry bristled; Ron's favorite topic: Harry-The Not-Very-Good-Boyfriend. "She hasn't been in here earlier than ten o'clock since the term began. And it's usually a lot later than that."

Harry was silent, staring at the fire. It was true that he hadn't noticed that Hermione had been disappearing in the evenings. They'd only had time alone together once since the term had started, and it was an awkward, hurried affair on a Saturday afternoon, born of their two-month separation. (And it was her way, she said, of thanking him for her birthday present.) Harry had felt somewhat embarrassed disrobing in front of her, as though she'd never seen him before, and she had been somewhat shy as well.

When they'd returned to the common room from Fluffy's old lair, where they'd had their tryst, Ron had looked daggers at Harry, clearly knowing what they'd been up to, and Harry had returned the look. Harry was damned if Ron was going to tell him what to do, but all the same--something about his relationship with Hermione felt changed. Different. Harry didn't want to believe he was being affected by what Ron had said at the Burrow, but deep down, he knew he was, that it was always at the back of his mind....

"Well," Ron said truculently. "I'm going to wait for her to get back. And ask her outright." He sat himself down in the armchair next to Harry's. Harry had no interest in speaking further with Ron, however. He sprang up.

"Well, I trust Hermione. I'm not going to sit around waiting for her like I'm her father. If you want her to get hacked off at you for treating her like a child, be my guest. Don't expect me to come visit you in the hospital wing when she hexes you, and don't blame me for the points Gryffindor's liable to lose for her performing magic on you." Harry took his book up to the dorm and settled down on the bed to read. His heart was thudding in his chest. It hadn't been very satisfying to talk to Ron. He wished he could go back down to the common room and say, 'What do you think she's doing? When did you first notice her disappearing?' But he didn't want to admit to Ron that he was also concerned now. Mostly he was annoyed with himself that he hadn't noticed her nightly disappearances. But then, Ron always noticed everything Hermione did. Harry had seen him in every class, gazing at Hermione when she was absorbed in her work, watching her chew every bite of food at every meal, watching her every second when she was dueling during club meetings....

The other boys came upstairs to bed and Harry noticed that still Ron had not returned. He extinguished his candle last, still in his clothes. He waited in the dark for Ron. He checked his watch in the moonlight; at twelve-thirty Ron was still not in his bed. He assumed that that meant Hermione wasn't back yet.

Great, Harry thought. Now I've got to be worried about the pair of them, even though I'm angry with that red-haired git and it turns out she's going somewhere every night and hasn't bothered to tell me about it. He went to his trunk and removed his map and his Invisibility Cloak. He crept out of the dorm and crossed the corridor into the lavatory. When the candles on the walls had flared into life, he took out his wand and spread the map on the counter between the sinks, waving the wand over it and saying, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

The map of Hogwarts appeared gradually. Harry looked at the corner where Gryffindor Tower was; in the common room he saw two dots, labeled 'Ron Weasley' and 'Hermione Granger.' So, she was back; Ron was probably asking her where she'd been, he thought. Fine; Ron could go off to the hospital wing alone when she caused boils to pop out all over his face. Then Harry noticed a moving dot near the Trophy Room labeled 'Virginia Weasley.' What was Ginny doing out at this hour? he wondered. He held his breath when he saw another moving dot labeled 'Argus Filch,' which appeared to be heading directly toward Ginny. He saw the dot that was Ginny duck into an alcove that he knew held a troll statue, and when Filch turned the corner, he kept moving past her, evidently unaware of her presence. Harry let out his breath again. What are you doing, Ginny? he thought. Filch is sure to catch you, or Mrs. Norris will lead him to you....

Then Harry noticed two other dots on the map, actually inside the Trophy Room. One was labeled 'Draco Malfoy' and the other was labeled 'Mariah Kirkner.' The dots were very close together. Harry swallowed. What was Malfoy up to with Mariah Kirkner at twelve-thirty at night in the Trophy Room? Did Ginny suspect? he wondered. Harry wondered whether Filch would discover them. That would serve them right. But then he thought of how Ginny would react if she knew they were together....He could be jumping to conclusions about the two of them, but he didn't seriously believe that. Ginny would be devastated....

He thrust the map into his pocket and threw on the Invisibility Cloak. At the very least, he could help Ginny get back to

Gryffindor Tower without her being caught by Filch. Hopefully, he could also prevent her seeing Draco Malfoy with Mariah Kirkner. Unless she already had....

Harry tiptoed down the stone stairs to the common room. He turned around, looking for Ron and Hermione. Finally, he found them, sitting at a table in a far corner, a lone candle illuminating the piles of books and scattered parchments upon which Hermione had fallen asleep, her head on her right arm. Ron had fallen asleep as well; his arm was around her waist and his head was on her shoulder. There was a string of drool falling slowly from his mouth onto Hermione's robe. Harry shuddered, then was thankful he would be able to leave without their noticing him.

But then, as if he could read minds, Ron suddenly lifted his head, swinging it around and blinking as though he'd heard Harry, who now stood frozen near the fireplace. Ron yawned, stretching, and then he put both hands on Hermione's shoulders, shaking her gently.

"Hermione," he whispered. She grunted. Harry smiled and resisted the urge to laugh, remembering how soundly she could sleep. "Hermione," Ron said again, more insistently. "It's late." He shook her shoulder again. Still no response except a sleepy, contented sort of noise as she turned her head in the other direction. Ron was now presented with the back of her head. He sighed, obviously very tired himself. Then he seemed hypnotized by something; he moved closer to her, and Harry found that it was her neck which suddenly seemed so fascinating to him, exposed by her short haircut. Ron brought his lips to her neck, once, briefly, and then sat back, waiting for a response. Harry held his breath.

Ron leaned in again, his mouth finding her neck once more, but not briefly this time. Finally, he had his response. She gurgled in her throat, turning her head, her eyes still closed. "I suppose you think that's going to get you somewhere, Harry," she said sleepily, assuming that if someone were kissing her neck, it had to be her boyfriend. Ron hesitated for a moment, then brushed his lips along her jaw, finally bringing his mouth in contact with hers. She still had not opened her eyes. She moved her hands up to touch his face, and when her hands detected his facial hair, her eyes flew open, even as their mouths were still touching. Then he touched her waist, and Harry knew what spot he'd come in contact with; it made her melt to be touched just so below her ribcage and above her hipbone, and she closed her eyes again, moaning softly as

she continued the kiss, opening her mouth. Harry could tell that she knew now who it was, and yet she still did it.

So. Ron was getting his wish, and Harry didn't have to break up with her for it to happen. He was shaking with rage. And Hermione! he thought. She wasn't even--

"No!" she suddenly cried, pulling back, coming to her senses at last. She covered her mouth with her hand, aghast. "I'm-- I'm sorry Ron. I'm tired, I wasn't thinking...."

He ran his hands through his hair, sitting back with a resigned expression on his face. "Well, I finally got you to wake up, didn't I?" he said, as though that were his only motivation. She raised an eyebrow.

"That's what that was all about?"

He looked at her with a mixture of love and resentment in his gaze. His voice was very hard. "We both arranged for your birthday present. Why should only Harry get something out of it?"

Her jaw dropped. "Oh, is that it? You expected some 'thank-you' snogging? Or 'thank-you' shagging?"

His face relaxed, he ran his hand over his beard. "No, no, Hermione. I just thought--I thought you'd like to have it with you here at school..."

She swallowed. "It was--it was your idea?" He nodded. "Oh, Ron--" She leaned toward him and slid her hands up around his neck, but the kiss was very brief. She moved back again. "There. A proper thank-you."

He smiled ruefully. "Well, I don't know about proper..."

"Oh, Ron. That was--I mean, how can you complain I was leading you on with that kiss?"

He smile turned into a grimace. "Yeah, well, I'm evidently made of stone."

She frowned at him, standing up to close books and gather up parchments. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He stood next to her and turned her to him, while she clutched a large library tome to her chest. "It's supposed to mean that

I can kiss you and you can kiss me, but somehow it's all my fault. And I'm not supposed to feel anything for you when--"

She looked down, coloring deeply. "Ron. It's late. This isn't the time for--"

"Then what is the time? When you've been with him for another ten years out of duty? When the hell is the time, Hermione?"

"Oh, now you think Harry's going to live another ten years, do you?"

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

She bristled. "For someone who pretends to care about me, you're certainly very good at thinking of nasty things to say about me."

He frowned. "What nasty things?"

"I know what you said to Harry. Before we all went to King's Cross."

Ron had the good grace to look ashamed. But then he recovered and looked slightly hostile instead. "Oh, he told you, did he?"

"No; Malfoy overheard the pair of you, evidently. He told Mariah Kirkner and she told me. Very nice. Now I know what you really think of me..."

"Hermione, these are two Slytherins we're talking about--" he said.

She ignored this. "I mean, you honestly think I just wanted to shag him before he dies? Did you actually say that?"

Ron shuffled nervously. "Erm--not exactly--"

"Not exactly. Oh, that's just lovely. Just lovely."

"Hermione, I just think--I think you're confused about why the two of you are together, that's all. If you really think about it--"

"Then what? I'll realize that I really want to be with the prat who, when he suddenly realized that Fleur Delacour wasn't losing sleep over him at night decided to notice I'm a girl?"

Very nice, Ron, very nice..." Harry swallowed. Hermione was still upset about Fleur Delacour?

"Hermione," he said softly. "You were kissing me a minute ago, and I don't mean your little 'thank-you' kiss..."

She looked flustered at being reminded of this. "Yes, well--" she trailed off, at a loss for words. "It's not nice to take advantage of someone being sleep-deprived--"

"Is that what it was? When we were at the Burrow it was, 'The sun was in my eyes...'"

This happened before? Harry thought. It must have been late summer. He wondered whether it was before or after Ron told him he should break up with her...

Ron stepped closer to her and stroked her cheek with his fingers. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I don't want to start a fight at this hour. I understand that you're tired. Is it--is it very difficult? I can't believe what you're putting yourself through every night...."

She seemed to relent a bit and reached up to rub her neck. Ron looked like he might want to do it for her. "Oh--you have no idea. But at the same time--when I get something right--it's absolutely incredible. It's brilliant. I can't really adequately describe it..."

He frowned. "Are you doing this for him?"

She looked completely exasperated. "No, Ron. I've wanted to do this since I first learned that some witches and wizards could. I am not doing this for Harry. For once in my life I'm doing something for me. Everything in my life is not about Harry Potter, even though you obviously take great pleasure in accusing me of that."

"Good. I'm glad you're doing it for you. I'm--I'm incredibly proud of you, you know. What you're doing....I can't even begin to imagine it." He shook his head, smiling at her. "Do you have any idea how special you are?" She colored, looking down. Ron put his hand under her chin and brought her face up to him again. "But don't pretend to me that you didn't know exactly what you were doing when you kissed me back, Hermione," he said softly. "You're not in love with Harry. And he's not in love with you. But someone else is..." he whispered against her mouth, and she was utterly still while he kissed her lightly and then withdrew, looking in her eyes, waiting,

hoping. She trembled, staring up at him with a clear fright showing in her face. He still held her chin in his hand. "Listen, I know I've been a complete sodding idiot and I don't deserve you--as if anyone does, and I know I should have said something a year ago--two years ago. But if you just say the word, Hermione, I'll leave it alone. Just say that you're not in love with me. I'll accept it, I will. Just say it and we can go on and pretend all this never happened..."

She continued to stare at him, then backed up, her mouth opening as though she would say something. But nothing came out of her mouth. Finally, a look of extreme distress contorting her face, she turned and fled up the staircase to the girls' dorms without another word or looking back at him. Ron brought both hands down on the heavy wooden table, swearing loudly at the same time that his palms struck the wood, producing a sound like a gunshot, then leaning heavily on his large hands, staring forlornly down at the scattered books and parchments, a single tear running down his cheek.

She couldn't say it.

Harry didn't know what to think. Had Hermione been unfaithful to him or not? Had Ron betrayed him or not? It wasn't like he didn't know how Ron felt. He just hadn't expected him to go ahead and kiss Hermione like that, just do it. He felt deflated, his rage gone, a kind of spirit-fatigue sapping his energy as he watched Ron trudge toward the stairs. Suddenly he was feeling an incredible wave of guilt for no reason he could identify, and he tried to shake this off. I'm not the one who did anything wrong tonight, he reminded himself sternly.

When he heard Ron's footsteps receding, he finally crept to the portrait hole and left Gryffindor Tower. He had a lot to think about when he returned to the dorm. But right now he needed to help Ginny return to her dorm without being discovered by Filch, and without discovering Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner. He tried to focus on the task at hand.

He checked his watch; he had been standing near the fireplace for less than ten minutes. Ginny could have been discovered in that time. He hurried down a flight of stairs, then checked the map to ascertain Ginny's position. He found that Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner were now down in the dungeon corridor, on their way back to Slytherin House, having somehow bypassed Filch. Why had they been in the Trophy Room in the first place? he wondered. Had they needed to

have a conversation that couldn't be overheard by other Slytherins?

Ginny's dot on the map was now in the Trophy Room. Did she suspect that her boyfriend was sneaking around with another girl? Then he saw the Argus Filch dot moving toward the Trophy Room. Damn! He would find her any second. Harry looked around the corridor in which he stood, down a flight from the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. There were two suits of armor standing side by side; they'd been worn by twin brothers in a thirteenth-century Goblin war. Harry ran toward them with all his might, producing an incredible CRASH! when the bits and pieces of the suits cascaded to the stone floor. He grabbed the sword that one of them was holding and proceeded to beat it against the breastplates of the suits and the helmets. Then he dropped the sword and dashed down some narrow stairs that were an alternate route to the library. He stopped on the stairs to look on the map for Filch, and sure enough, his dot was now moving swiftly toward the source of the noise, taking a slightly different route. If Filch had thought he would check the Trophy Room for students, he was clearly going to have to postpone that until after he investigated the wrecked suits of armor.

Harry ran down the stairs, then up another short flight after going down a corridor whose only purpose was to connect the stairs. After several more turns and going up and down staircases, he dashed into the Trophy Room, checking the map again; she was on the far side of the largest display case. He couldn't see her; she was obviously hiding from Filch. He went behind the case himself, seeing her crouching there immediately, and he put the map into his pocket and picked up the edge of the cloak, stooping over to look at her.

"Ginny!"

She turned her head and opened her eyes wide and began to scream; Harry quickly put his hand over her mouth.

"Don't do that!" he hissed. "I'm here to help you get back to Gryffindor Tower. Filch almost had you but I wrecked some armor upstairs to distract him. Here--get under the cloak with me."

She recovered, scrambling to her feet and ducking under the cloak, whispering to him as they shuffled cautiously toward the door.

"How did you know I was here?" her mouth was so close to his ear he shivered.

"Fred and George's old map. I was wondering where Ron was, but when I looked, there you were, about to be nabbed by Filch."

She nodded, continuing to shuffle along beside him. Her left hand kept brushing his right thigh, sending sparks through him that he was having a very hard time ignoring. Then they heard pounding footsteps, and Harry pulled her into the alcove in which she'd been hiding before, behind the troll statue.

They saw Filch stride purposefully into the Trophy Room, looking around suspiciously, Mrs. Norris by his side. Then the cat turned and Harry could swear she looked right at the pair of them, pressed into the alcove. Harry held his breath. It was a tight spot; they were pressed together very closely, her hair tickling his nose, her breath warm against his neck. He thought he might very well be going insane from the closeness to her....

"Eh? What's that, my sweet?" Harry could see over Ginny's shoulder, around the statue. Filch, in the middle of the Trophy Room, turned on his heel and walked back into the corridor, where the cat stood staring, evidently, at the troll statue. Filch stopped and began to stare at the statue as well, then looked down at the cat.

"You never liked'em, I know, but that's no reason to stare...."

He turned away and began striding back in the direction of the wrecked armor. Perhaps he had left it, Harry thought, because he correctly surmised that it was a ruse to draw him off from someone else.

Ginny started to move, but Harry put his arm around her waist, holding her to him. "Too soon," he whispered. "And the armor is at the foot of the stairs to the Gryffindor common room. It was the best I could do. He might be watching there for a while; if the portrait opens and no one's there, he'll be pretty suspicious...."

She nodded, then leaned against him and put her head down on his shoulder. She didn't have much choice; with his arm around her waist she was forced to continue to stand very close to him. He tentatively put his other arm around her shoulder, closing his eyes.

Ginny. He was holding Ginny. The simple fact of her, of her gentle breathing and her heartbeat, serving as a metronome for his own heart and breath, calmed him and made him feel more peaceful than he had since returning to Hogwarts. At length, he whispered to her, "Why were you out this late, Ginny?"

She lifted her head from his shoulder to speak, and he could feel the heat radiating from her face. She was embarrassed.

"When I was leaving Potions, I noticed a note on the floor in Draco's handwriting. I'd know it anywhere. It said, 'Trophy Room at midnight.' It wasn't signed, of course, and didn't have my name on it either. He was being discreet, obviously. He must have tucked it into one of my books when I didn't realize. I'm lucky I found it at all. But now he'll think I've stood him up. Filch has been maddening; I've been trying to get to the Trophy Room since eleven-thirty. No matter what route I chose, he always seemed to get in my way."

Harry never thought he would do this, but now he thought fervently, Thank goodness for Argus Filch! If it weren't for Filch, Ginny would have reached the Trophy Room and found-- what? Perhaps Malfoy had intended to meet Ginny, and Mariah was worried about him possibly being ambushed by other Slytherins and followed him, and perhaps they'd just chatted while he waited for Ginny, who was being thwarted by Filch....

But he knew he was probably grasping at straws. How could he find out, though? He looked in her dark eyes. "How do you like Potions with MacDermid?"

She shrugged prettily. "Fine. I'm still getting used to his accent, but he seems to know what he's doing."

Harry nodded, trying to work out how to ask her what he needed to know without her suspecting anything. "Who do you usually work with? Zoey? Ruth?"

"I used to work with either Annika or Colin, but he likes pairing up Gryffindors and Slytherins. Good for intra-house cooperation, he says."

He nodded. "He does that with us, too." Harry, unfortunately, had been stuck working with Pansy Parkinson since the term had begun.

"So which Slytherin did he stick you with?"

"I'm lucky. I got Mariah. I don't think he knew that we were already friends. It could have been a lot worse. Jason Bassett keeps trying to pinch my bum--" Suddenly, she blushed. "Oh-- sorry--"

He smiled at her; their faces couldn't have been more than an inch apart. His hand was just a few inches higher than Jason Bassett's usual target....

"That's all right. I know what teenage boys are like, and what gets their hormones racing--" Suddenly, he was the one blushing, saying this to her while holding her in his arms. He turned his eyes away from her, his heart going very fast. "It's probably safe now," he said, trying to change the mood. "Let's give it a try."

She nodded and they slipped out of the alcove. Harry kept his arm around her waist, and she put hers around his as well, so they took up less space under the cloak. They crept up some hidden staircases Harry knew of, and Ginny then led them up another he didn't know about, the entrance covered by a tapestry. They finally reached the portrait of the Fat Lady without encountering Filch, and were admitted when they gave the correct password ("Mugwort."). Once in the common room, they removed the cloak and each sank with relief into one of the armchairs near the dark fireplace. It was already starting to get cold at night, so Harry pointed his wand at the firebox to start a fire. Ginny sighed, sitting back in her chair with her eyes closed, and Harry smiled, watching the flames illuminate her peaceful features and her hair which seemed to have more shades of red and gold than the fire itself. Then he remembered Malfoy again. I will have to have a talk with him, he thought. Or maybe--maybe he should talk with Mariah Kirkner. In any event, Ginny must never know that the two of them were in the Trophy Room, and that the note was probably not meant for her, but Mariah, who must have been the one who dropped it during Potions....

Ginny opened her eyes abruptly. "Gah. I dozed off. I should do that upstairs. Thanks for helping me get back, Harry. Perhaps sometime--I could borrow your map? Or your cloak--?" She smiled hopefully. He wanted to refuse, but her pleading eyes made it so difficult.

"Perhaps," he said, thinking that this could be very dangerous. If she saw her boyfriend and Mariah Kirkner together on the map, or came upon them while she was wearing the Invisibility Cloak and they were unaware of her presence....

He shook himself. He'd talk with one of them. Find out exactly what was what. Ginny mustn't be hurt; that was the most important thing. She rose now and bent over him; he held his breath for what seemed to be the hundredth time since he'd come down from the dorm. Her hair formed curtains on either side of his face and her mouth came closer and closer to his....

"Goodnight, Harry," she said softly, kissing him on the cheek. Then, all too soon, he was grasping at empty air and she was gone, skipping up the stairs to the girls' dorm. Harry leaned back and sighed, then finally went back up to bed, feeling like he could sleep for a year, and dreading having to confront either Malfoy or Mariah about their midnight wanderings....

Harry thought about what he'd remembered. He hadn't yet recalled making up with Ron. That must have come later. He surveyed the peaceful sleeping shapes that were Neville, Dean and Seamus. *Thank goodness I'm not in the same dorm with Zabini any more*, he thought, wondering how Malfoy was faring with that. *I hope Zabini's giving him hell....*

But when he looked over at Ron's bed, it was empty. He'd thought his snores were just blending in with the others. Harry checked his watch; it was almost midnight. After the memory he'd just pulled out of his brain, this was feeling very, very familiar. He padded softly to the door without putting his shoes on, then crept down the stone stairs to the common room. The treads felt cool through his socks. When he reached the shadowy archway leading into the comfortable space, he saw that only two people were left: Ron and Hermione. The torches in the room had been extinguished and they sat on the floor before the fire, which was now the only light. They were leaning against the same armchair. Ron's arm was around her shoulders and her head leant on his chest, his cheek on her hair. They were speaking to each other softly, but in the empty room, the words carried easily to Harry's ears.

"...and he was fine then," Hermione was saying, looking into the flames.

"Well," Ron said, "would you really say *fine*? I mean--"

"That's true--"

They were silent again. Harry assumed they had been talking about him, but he couldn't tell what any of the specifics were.

"Hermione," Ron said softly, looking down at her. "You need to do it. He's not going to. I thought he might, but--"

--but you went out of your way to get him hacked off last summer, so he's decided to be contrary?" she smirked. Ron's ears turned red.

"Okay, okay, we've covered that. I did a really stupid thing. I meant well...."

She stroked his cheek tenderly. "I know you did, in your completely inept way." She seemed to have gotten over his accusing her of wanting to shag Harry before he died. Somehow, her statement sounded more affectionate than critical, and Ron didn't object to the assessment. "But how can I--I mean, I'd *die* if I ever did anything to hurt him. And then he was being so strange tonight. You don't suppose--"

"It's hurting him to let this go on for so long. In the end, it's really the kindest thing, Hermione. It would free him."

"And me," she said more softly still, looking down and lacing her fingers through his.

"You wouldn't be selfish to do it, Hermione. It would be honest."

She looked up at him in distress. "It would be abandoning him. He still seems to *need* me so much--"

Now Ron made a face. "Well of course he feels like he needs *that*. He's a normal teenage boy...."

She hit him on the arm now, but it wasn't hard. "That's not what I mean. Although--"

"What?"

She hesitated, looked down. Her voice was very soft. "It seems that for quite a while now, I'm the one who has to start things. And it's not that he doesn't go along once we start, it just seems--"

--like he's going along?"

She nodded, turning pink. "Not that that even happens very often..."

He cupped her chin in his hand. "Are you afraid you're not desirable, Hermione?" he whispered. She turned her head, pushed his hand away.

"Don't make fun, Ron--"

"I'm not. I'm just wondering whether--"

"That's not what's worrying me, Ron. Afterward, we just--we just hold each other quietly. No talking. It never used to be that way. He feels so--separate. In another world. And once he was rather tired after and dozed off. While he was sleeping, he was having very restless dreams, calling for

his mother, and also saying--" She hesitated. Harry held his breath. He hoped he hadn't been saying Ginny's name....

"What?" Ron wanted to know. Harry was amazed that Ron had been so patient for so long, and that he was able to sit here and listen to her speaking of sleeping with her boyfriend when he wanted her, too.

"He said, 'Jamie,'" she said, perplexed. Ron looked the same.

"Why would he call his dad by his first name? By a nickname, actually."

She shook her head. "I don't know. And sometimes when he was mentioning his mother, he was saying, 'I'm sorry, Mum, I'm sorry.'"

Ron stared into the fire. "He was doing that when he fell asleep on the train to school, remember?"

She nodded. "He's been queer ever since then. First he had to run and jump on the train after it had started moving, then he looked as though he'd been through some horrible ordeal, and his clothes were cold and damp and he had wet leaves all over his robes. And he just looked--horrified. I haven't seen him look like that since the dementors were here in third year. He looked like that after being too near them and hearing his parents scream while they died...."

"And then, last October, he went to see Dumbledore, said he couldn't not tell him any longer..."

"Tell him what?"

Ron shrugged. "He wouldn't say. He said we'd know sometime in May. I thought he was barmy, and I didn't think about it again. But now--now it's May. And something weird was going on with him tonight..."

They were silent, both looking at the fire, then suddenly, Hermione reached over for his left arm and dragged his hand up before her face. It took Harry a moment to realize that she was trying to see Ron's watch.

"It's after midnight. Happy birthday."

He looked down at her, his face full of emotion. "Thanks," he said almost inaudibly, then leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. She let him do it, then turned her head quickly so it remained a brother's kiss. He put his hand on her cheek and turned her head back to him.

"Hermione--"

"No, Ron. Not yet." He lowered his hand and sighed, turning to look at the fire again. "I'm sorry," she went on. "I really am. But--he's gotten so bad, and I'm afraid--"

--afraid he'll get even worse. I know, I know..."

"I mean--he goes through all the motions. Gets up, goes running. Runs the Dueling Club. Trains the elves..."

Trains the elves? Harry thought, perplexed.

"...goes to prefects' meetings, goes to Quidditch practice, does his homework...but it's like he's not really here."

Ron furrowed his brow. "Well, it's been a pretty uneventful year in the castle. All of the stuff that's been happening seems pretty far away. I mean, the news from the outside world has been pretty appalling, but we can't *do* anything about it from here. Usually he's had more to occupy him. Not that that was a *good* thing....But, I dunno. Maybe he's bored?"

"Bored because he only has school to worry about instead of people trying to kill him or recruit him to be a Death Eater? He should have been so bored the last five years..."

"That's not what I meant."

She looked at the fire. "He misses Snape. I know that. He's said so, many times. It's so odd. First year, I never would have thought those words would come out of his mouth."

Ron laughed. "That's true. Although he admitted that MacDermid's not bad--" he looked slyly at Hermione. "--and *you* think he's not hard on the eyes...."

She hit him again. "Stop that! Don't tease--"

He laughed again. "If you're going to be gawking at him, at least he's not a git like Gilderoy Lockhart...."

She raised one eyebrow and looked like she was about to taunt him. She did. "You should have seen him in a kilt at the ceilidh last year..."

"That wasn't him; that was Snape."

"But he was using his uncle's appearance."

Ron smiled. "He's ancient, you know."

"He isn't; only around--what? Sixty?"

"Should I tell Harry you're running off to elope with Professor MacDermid?" His eyes were merry. She poked him in the ribs.

"Stop. I'm not as bad as Pansy Parkinson. Gah. I think she ruined her venom antidote last week because it had too much *drool* in it..."

They both laughed, then Hermione tried unsuccessfully to stifle a huge yawn, and she stretched both arms over her head, groaning.

"Oh, I need to get some sleep--"

"I'll walk you to your dorm--" Ron said, standing and extending a hand to help her up; he had swallowed, watching her blouse intently when she'd been stretching. Her robe was open over the simple white blouse and grey skirt. She seemed to be oblivious to the effect her stretching had had on him.

"All right. Then maybe I won't wind up sleeping on the stairs...."

He scooped her up in his arms suddenly, grinning. "I can always carry you up--"

"Put me down!" she said, hitting him on the chest, turning deep crimson as he deposited her feet on the floor again. They stood very close to each other, and the look in their eyes as she gazed up and he gazed down was unmistakable. But when she raised herself on her toes, she brushed his cheek with her lips, in that small soft spot between his mouth and his sideburns where the beard didn't grow.

"Harry birthday, Ron."

He groaned, looking down at her, his hands on her shoulders. "Who's teasing now?" he asked quietly. She looked down and walked toward the stairs to the girls' dorms, her hand trailing out in the air behind her, and he caught it and followed her. Harry shrank back into the shadows in the entrance to the boys' stairs when they passed. When he heard them going up the other stairs, he padded softly back up to the sixth year boys' dorm and scrambled into bed; then he realized he was still clothed, and he leapt up, undressing quickly, then springing back into bed just as Ron opened the door. Harry saw him swing his head in his direction, and he immediately closed his eyes, feigning sleep. After a few minutes, he dared open them; Ron was undressing for bed. When Harry heard him climb into his four poster, he called out softly, "Is that you Ron?" as though it could be anyone else.

"Yeah, Harry. You all right?"

"Fine. Happy birthday."

A pause. "Thanks. We should get some sleep."

"Right. G'night, Ron."

"G'night, Harry."

Harry listened to his friend's breathing in the dark, wondering for how much longer he and Hermione would be able to continue reining themselves in....

* * * * *

His eyes flew open in the dark. He stared up at his canopy, breathing hard. He had thought he was having a dream, but after a time he realized that it was actually another memory. It was starting to slip away from him again. He closed his eyes and tried to remember. Ginny had said that he'd told her before that he loved her, and now he *did* remember. It hadn't been that night under the Invisibility Cloak, hiding from Filch. It was during the Christmas holiday....

There were a lot of students staying at the castle during Christmas. Many of them were reluctant to return to the dangerous outside world (although they were also worried about their families) and to ease any feelings of guilt they might be having because of this, Dumbledore had told the students that he wanted as much participation as possible in the second annual Boxing Day switch with the elves.

Harry felt like the autumn term was all about elves. Elves, elves, elves. They talked about elves in Hagrid's class. Lupin had them learning about various species of elves that lurked in dark places and tended to lie in wait to harm humans. In October, Dumbledore had put Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny in charge of training an Elven Army to fight dark wizards alongside other magical humans, with the promise that no elf would receive clothes that did not specifically ask for them. They didn't give the elves wands, but things they were teaching them did start to verge on breaking the laws that had been laid down by the Ministry to curtail elves' freedom and autonomy.

Many of the elves had actually decided they liked the training. (Dumbledore had convinced them that they were still being of service to humans, which is the most important thing to a house-elf.) Harry was the General and Hermione the Colonel, because of their work with the elves during the previous Boxing Day (the elves chose them by acclamation); Hermione convinced them to make Ron a Lieutenant. It was during these elf-training sessions that the relationship between Harry and

Ron normalized somewhat; they had to unite against the collective menace that the house-elves represented (they could be quite infuriating at times), and by mid-October, Harry and Ron were actually able to laugh with each other again. However, at the back of Harry's mind was the night when he'd helped Ginny return to the dorm, the night when Hermione couldn't tell Ron she wasn't in love with him. He felt more distant from her all the time, unable to get this out of his mind....

Draco Malfoy had declined when Dumbledore had also offered him a position of leadership in the Elven Army; he didn't like house elves, free or not. He'd been just as happy to see the back of Dobby after Lucius Malfoy had accidentally freed him by flinging the sock at him with Riddle's diary in it (inadvertently creating Dobby's sock obsession). Ironically, Ron, who'd always told Hermione it was crazy to free house-elves, was the one who had accidentally come up with the idea for the Elven Army, which Harry then proposed to the headmaster (reluctantly admitting that it wasn't his idea). This was why Hermione had campaigned for Ron to have a leadership role. Harry had to admit, it was a good idea. Elves were very powerful. He remembered vividly the way Dobby had been able to make Lucius Malfoy fly down that flight of stairs, with absolutely no wand at all....

But the house-elves had to also agree that one day a year, they would allow the humans to wait on them. On Boxing Day they would leave off their cooking and cleaning and let the staff and students take over management of the castle.

Hermione was thrilled that her idea from the previous year was being taken up again, even if she was a little wistful about not spending the holiday with her parents--yet again--and Ron and Ginny also hated the idea of not being at home for the holiday (Ginny stayed because Draco had no home to go to, and Ron stayed to keep an eye on Ginny). To compensate for this, Percy and the twins invited their parents and older brothers to come spend Christmas at Hog's End in Hogsmeade, and Percy himself went to Dumbledore to ask whether Ron and Ginny could come down to the village for the day to celebrate with family; they could be back at the castle before bed time and be all set to participate in the Boxing Day switch the next morning.

Dumbledore had given his permission, and Ron immediately wangled invitations and permission for Harry and Hermione as well, and Ginny managed to get Draco included too (although Harry had thought he looked rather apprehensive about this). Then it grew still further; since Angelina was still seeing

George (they actually lived in the same bedroom at the house, something Mrs. Weasley studiously ignored) and Yarrow Swartz was now seeing Fred, the two of them were going to prepare the Christmas dinner. Upon hearing this, Ron was convinced that his mother would be physically unable to stay out of the kitchen (even if she did only deign to use monosyllables around Angelina).

Angelina's parents were coming as well, and Lee Jordan and his parents and older sister, along with his sister's husband (who was a Muggle) and their three children. Lee and Katie had broken up, and he dreaded his sister playing matchmaker (Fred and George had told Harry this). It promised to be madness, but Harry was looking forward to it. He'd only ever experienced Christmas at the Dursleys and at Hogwarts. He'd never been in a large, noisy private home for the holiday (with people who liked him). Hermione's parents were coming too; they were driving to Ottery St. Catchpole and the Weasleys' home, then they were going to come through the Floo network with Mrs. Weasley. (Mr. Weasley and Bill and Charlie were going to Apparate). Hermione was a little nervous about this, as her parents had never traveled by Floo before. The one thing everyone was worried about was Percy; he seemed to be forcing the whole Christmas thing, compulsively decorating the house, forbidding the twins and Lee to look in cupboards where he'd hidden presents (he'd put some nasty curses on some of the locks) and in general, it seemed that he was trying to forget through overactivity that he was without Penelope during the holiday.

When Harry and Ron awoke on Christmas morning, they wished each other a happy Christmas, but it was odd not to see piles of presents at the feet of their beds. They would be exchanging gifts at Hog's End, and both Harry and Ron had a pillowcase that they were using to carry the gifts they were bringing for other people. They met Hermione and Ginny in the common room, also wishing them a happy Christmas and carrying gift-laden pillowcases of their own. Then the four Gryffindors met Draco Malfoy in the entrance hall, serenaded on the way down by various suits of armor singing off-key carols. (One suit singing an off-color carol turned out to have Peeves inside it.) The pale Slytherin dropped his jaw when he saw the four of them.

"What are you carrying pillowcases for?"

"I know you were virtually raised in a cave, Malfoy, but have you never heard of the tradition of exchanging gifts at Christmas?" Ron demanded.

He narrowed his grey eyes and drew his mouth into a line. "That's all very well and good if you have the money to buy gifts...." he said softly, clearly very uncomfortable about this, especially since he was talking to Ron Weasley.

Draco Malfoy had not taken well to being destitute. He had insisted upon using the money he'd earned during the summer to pay for his own school supplies for the year. Between the actual cost of the purchases and the exorbitant exchange rates the goblins charged him to change his Muggle money into wizarding money, it had left him with only a few sickles, which had disappeared after the first two Hogsmeade weekends. Harry had even tried to offer him a loan of a few Galleons for Christmas gifts, which he had thrown at Harry's feet before stalking off. Afterward, Harry had heard Ginny arguing with him about it. Ron, not Harry, had told her what Harry had done, and she was calling her boyfriend pigheaded and ungrateful. They were in the corridor outside the library, and Harry had sunk into a classroom doorway to avoid being seen. Draco Malfoy wasn't any more gracious than Ron Weasley was about being helped financially. Harry suspected that Ron had told Ginny about this because he was feeling very smug, but it annoyed Harry that he couldn't see his own behavior in Malfoy.

Ron, on the other hand, had been very careful about hoarding his reward money. He'd spent almost none of it and considered every purchase very, very carefully, almost as though he were risking being broke again if he spent so much as one Knut. Hermione was somewhat irritated about this; when the three of them went to Hogsmeade and stopped in Honeyduke's, Ron spent an inordinate amount of time calculating which treats were the best buy for the money.

"See," he would start to say, "the Transfiguring Toffees are quite chewy, so they last a long time. Chocolate Frogs, on the other hand, are more expensive and go very quickly. Although you might say that that's offset by the fact that you get to keep the wizard card...."

She would roll her eyes and practically snarl, "Just pick something already!"

Harry shifted his feet uncomfortably on the cold stone flags of the entrance hall. "Let's just go, okay?" he said, trying not to look at Malfoy. They were meeting Hagrid in front of the castle, where the horseless carriages were waiting for them. Percy had invited Hagrid on impulse when he'd come to the castle to ask Dumbledore for permission for Ginny and Ron to

come to the village. Hagrid hadn't told them he was coming until Christmas Eve, slapping Ron on the back so hard when he did tell them, Harry thought Ron just might go through the stone floor down into the dungeons.

They climbed into the carriages, Hagrid in one with Ginny and Malfoy (making it sink down considerably) and Harry, Ron and Hermione in the other. Harry tried to push his worries to the back of his mind. The three of them smiled at each other as they rode to the village, anticipating a wonderful Christmas day at Hog's End. Where necessary, the wheels magically changed to sled runners so they wouldn't stall on the snow that was already scattered here and there.

Soon they were pulling up in the drive of Hog's End. The large front door had an enormous wreath on it. They climbed out and the door immediately opened and Percy stood in the doorway, grinning at them. "Happy Christmas, everyone! Come inside, quickly....presents go under the tree in the drawing room...."

There was an enormous tree in the entrance hall as well, plus green garlands looped along the banister leading to the second floor and along the balustrade edging the balcony that overlooked the hall. Fairy lights glittered on the tree and in the leafy garlands, and intricate blown-glass ornaments on the tree seemed to change color from moment to moment, while some bell-shaped ornaments played Here We Come A-Wassailing as though they were part of a carillon. Harry agreed that Percy did seem slightly hyper, but he reasoned that it was just his way of coping. Whose business was it if this was the way he wanted to mourn Penelope?

The twins took their cloaks in the front hall; there was much laughter and cries of, "Happy Christmas!" and sly peeks into the pillowcases with the gifts. They went into the drawing room to place their presents under the tree and say hello to the other guests. Mrs. Weasley greeted all of them warmly, especially Draco Malfoy, it seemed to Harry, who visibly flinched under her gaze (he seemed to think it was pity, and he hated being pitied). Bill slapped him on the back and Charlie shook his hand (squeezing rather hard, it seemed to Harry, based on Malfoy's slightly-pinched facial expression).

They played Exploding Snap and wizarding chess and sang carols around a magical player piano. Mrs. Weasley looked around shiftily at one point and then slipped from the room; Harry exchanged a look with Ron. They both knew she was going to invade the kitchen, and make Angelina's and Yarrow's

lives hell. Hermione and Ginny followed soon after; perhaps they thought they could neutralize Mrs. Weasley's effect on the other girls.

At noon they sat down for Christmas dinner at the enormous refectory table in the kitchen, since the house's dining room had been pressed into service as a combined office for Lee and the twins. There were twenty-five people total; Percy placed his parents at one end of the table, while Hagrid sat at the other end by himself and the rest of them flanked its length, eleven people to a side.

It was an unparalleled feast; even Mrs. Weasley could fault nothing, from the enormous Christmas goose to the flaming plum pudding. There were wizarding Christmas crackers at each place, and the Grangers were delighted with these, having never encountered them before. Lee's brother-in-law, Miles, began a long diatribe about his gradual introduction into the wizarding world, and Harry was grateful that there being so many people meant that there were several conversations to choose from at any given moment.

After the meal, they retired to the drawing room and Lee's nieces--Tina, Lee Ann (named for her uncle) and Millie, as the only children present, had the job of running around the room delivering presents to people. It was mayhem, but enjoyable mayhem. At least half-a-dozen people were opening presents at any given moment. Each time a package was deposited in Draco Malfoy's lap, Harry noticed that he grew very pink, opening it very slowly. He knew he was dreading someone noticing that none of the presents were from him.

At length, Harry noticed Ginny rise and leave the room. He looked around; there were so many people that no one had noticed she had gone, and he rose slowly and made his way to the door, following her to the kitchen. She didn't seem to have noticed that someone was twenty feet behind her.

The torches on the walls flared into life when she entered; although Percy and the twins had bought a generator to power a fridge, they still used magic for lighting. Ginny went through to the pantry, still not noticing someone was following her, and she opened the fridge door and removed a bottle of butterbeer, then went to the back door and opened it, leaning against the jamb, feeling the cool breeze and looking at the starry night sky. Harry almost didn't want to disturb her, she looked so peaceful. The drawing room, noisy and full of people had been a bit tiresome and far too warm, and he didn't blame her for wanting to get away.

But he hadn't given her his present yet; he didn't want to do it around so many other people. He had to do it now, before he lost his nerve. He'd been unable to get that September night out of his mind; he was so worried that she would be hurt by Malfoy. The next day, he had confronted Malfoy, telling him that it wasn't a good idea to slip notes into Ginny's books asking her to meet him in the middle of the night. He'd looked baffled, and Harry had told him that because Ginny had found his note asking him to meet her in the Trophy Room at midnight when she was done Potions, she had nearly been caught out by Filch, and had been lucky to get back to Gryffindor Tower without a detention. Malfoy let out a sigh of relief and agreed that it had been a stupid thing to do, which left Harry speechless and suspicious; Malfoy never admitted to doing stupid things....

"Ginny," he said softly. She whirled, startled.

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

"I--I haven't given you your present yet."

"But all of the presents have been given out--"

He removed a small cloth-wrapped package from his pocket. "It wasn't under the tree." He handed it to her. "Happy Christmas, Ginny."

She took it and looked at him uncertainly. Placing her bottle on the old slate counter, she opened the gift, frowning in puzzlement. When she saw what it was, she looked horrified.

"Harry! Why--why are you giving this back to me?"

It was the basilisk amulet. He smiled at her. "I'm not. It's another one. Here," he said, moving behind her and putting it around her neck. She looked down at it uncertainly.

"But--but the man I bought it from said it was one-of-a-kind...."

Now it was Harry's turn to frown. "Where did you get it from?"

She looked at the doorway of the pantry as though she was afraid they'd be overheard. "Promise not to tell?" He nodded. "It was actually in a pawnshop in Knockturn Alley."

"Oh--do you mean Borgin and Burkes?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

"Um, never mind. What were you doing in Knockturn Alley?"

She sighed. "I was hacked off at Mum, what else? We'd had a row and I ducked out of the back of Flourish and Blotts and just started running, turning corners without really paying attention to where I was going. The next thing I knew, I was staring in a shop window with this on display. I didn't even pay attention at first to the fact that I was in Knockturn Alley. I just went into the shop and asked how much it was. I recognized it for a basilisk right away. It just seemed--it seemed like the perfect thing to get you for your birthday. And I could afford it too--except that my money was at home, in my room. I hadn't been planning to buy anything that day. I asked him whether he'd set it aside if I promised to come back the next day, and he said he couldn't make any promises. I think that was just to scare me.

"The next day, when Mum was busy in the garden, I used some Floo powder to go to the shop with my money. Mr. Borgin seemed surprised to see me again. He let me hold the amulet and--and the oddest thing happened. When I did that and closed my eyes, I saw you, working in a garden. It was a little fuzzy, but there you were. I thought that must be some sort of sign that I was supposed to give it to you. So I paid for it and he wrapped it up, and I went home. Of course, as soon as I stepped out of the kitchen fire, there was Mum, demanding to know where I'd gone and why. We had another row. Anyway, in my haste to get back home before Mum noticed I was gone, I forgot to ask Mr. Borgin where he'd gotten it."

She turned the amulet over, staring at both sides. "Are you sure it isn't the same one?" He pulled his amulet out of his shirt and showed it to her. She nodded. "I suppose that's just something shop-owners say, 'one-of-a-kind.' They'd like you to think that, but it's just to make a sale...."

"Except," Harry said, "that it is the same one."

"But--you just showed me your amulet."

"Yes. It's--it's the same one because of where I got that one from," he said, nodding at the amulet she now wore. She waited, then sighed and gave in.

"And just where did you get it?"

He frowned. "Promise not to think I'm nutters?"

She laughed. "I don't know...."

He smiled. "Okay, okay. It was given to me. By someone who-who had traveled through time." She didn't change her expression. "Ginny?" he said, wondering if she had somehow suddenly become petrified by the amulet. She shook herself.

"Um--I'm here, Harry. Did you just say what I think you said?"

"If you thought I said I'd gotten it from a time traveler, then yes." What he didn't say was that he had received it from himself while he was traveling through time. "Now Ginny--you said you wouldn't think I was mad--"

"I said no such thing," she retorted, then laughed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's just that--well, you know what it sounds like--"

"Why do you think I asked you not to think I'm nutters?" He grinned at her. "Anyway--do you like it?"

She looked down at it. "Of course I do...."

He stepped toward her and put his hand on her cheek. Thinking about how Ron felt about Hermione, and about how full his heart felt now. "I'm glad," he whispered. She looked up at him, a slightly apprehensive shadow behind her eyes, and he slowly leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. She didn't move or respond, but continued to look at him with that shadow in her eyes. He pulled back, his hand still on her cheek. "I--I love you so much, Ginny--"

She widened her eyes and backed up, so that she was completely outdoors now; she hugged herself for warmth. "H-harry," she stuttered, her teeth clacking. "Please. Don't say--" She stopped, swallowing, then wrapped her hand around the amulet and closed her eyes. The moment she did, she shivered, then opened her eyes again. She took off the amulet abruptly and handed it to him.

"I'm--I'm sorry, Harry. I can't accept it. You--you give it to Hermione or something." She pushed past him and closed the outside door, still shivering. Harry stared down at the amulet, perplexed.

"Ginny--why? Because--because of what I said?"

She turned around at the doorway that led back to the kitchen. "Um--partly--"

"Well--what's the other part? Did you--did you see something when you held it?"

She looked straight into his eyes and said, "Oh, Harry. I'm sorry. But--"

"What?"

She sighed.

"Draco."

His stomach dropped into his feet. "Draco?"

She nodded. "Harry--I'm sure Hermione will like it very much--"

He shook his head, feeling like crying. "No, no; she was petrified by a basilisk, remember?" And I'm not in love with her, I'm in love with you. I was going to tell her as soon as I'd told you, give her her freedom, so she no longer thinks I'll fall apart without her....

Ginny looked shocked, then recovered. "She--she was petrified by the basilisk I loosed upon the school..."

"That wasn't your fault! That was Riddle!"

"Still....I don't think you and I should be going about with matching amulets. That's--that's a 'couple' sort of thing to do. We're--we're not a couple, Harry." She looked like she hesitated to say this. He knew he was probably showing how hurt he was very clearly on his face. "You and Hermione are a couple. I--thought you loved her."

He hesitated. She would be horrified if he said 'No, I don't,' which wasn't strictly true, anyway. "I do, but it's--it's different. It's nothing like the way I feel about you--" And your brother's in love with her, he couldn't help thinking....

"Harry," she said, "please don't--don't say that again. When I bought that for you I was a different person. I've changed. Perhaps--perhaps the problem is that I'm the one who loves Hermione. As a friend, I mean. I could never--I could never hurt her...."

She looked at him helplessly, her eyes full of regret. "Do what you like with the amulet, Harry. We mustn't speak of this again...."

She left quickly, before he could say anything, agreeing or disagreeing, and he slumped against the doorway, looking down at the basilisk in his hand.

When she'd held it, she had seen Draco Malfoy....

He rolled over and closed his eyes, trying to get back to sleep, but he ached inside, remembering now the way she had looked at him when she had admitted to seeing her boyfriend, not Harry, when she'd held the amulet....

It had all gone wrong. He was going to tell Ginny he loved her and also tell Hermione that he loved Ginny and that she was free to be with Ron....but after Christmas, he clung to Hermione more tenaciously than ever, knowing it was wrong, but also knowing that she would never leave him as long as she thought he needed her. Ron was speaking to him again, but now Harry felt as though *he* were the one in the wrong, the one who should be snubbed and ostracized for continuing to claim a girl who loved and was loved by someone else.

Harry sighed; perhaps he and Ginny were never meant to be, like everything else in his other life. He thought about the way Hermione and Ron looked at each other, the way they seemed to be holding themselves in check constantly. *Because of me.* Something had obviously happened between them since September. Something emotional, if not physical. And today was Ron's seventeenth birthday. *This has gone on long enough*, he decided. *I may have had a bad reaction to the stupid things Ron said at the end of the summer, and to Ginny telling me she saw Draco when she held the amulet, but I have to get over that and do the right thing, for the sake of my two best friends....*

He had to put a stop to it.

Even if it meant being alone.

* * * * *

Harry blinked when a sunbeam struck his face full force; he hadn't pulled his curtains closed around his bed the night before. He sat up, looking around the room, smiling, feeling peaceful and refreshed and satisfied with the decisions he'd made in the night. Most importantly, he was waking up in Gryffindor tower! It was true that he had traded one imperfect world for another, but this at least was the world as it was meant to be.

He scrambled out of bed and pulled on his running clothes. Going to the window, he opened it and breathed in the fresh spring air. It was a beautiful day, and he had a chance now to make things right in *this* world. He and Hermione would have a chance to talk, alone, after their morning run, and he could do it then. If *he* was the one who broke up with her now, surely she wouldn't be upset? It seemed that she wanted to be with Ron and he with her. If *he* did it, then she wouldn't have to feel guilty about it, as it seemed she might when he overheard her and Ron. He just had to do it in a way that didn't seem odd or abrupt. She already seemed to think he was strange and distant since September first. And she and Ron were aware of him telling Dumbledore something in October...Had he told him about the timelines? he wondered.

But when he reached the common room, he found a virtual running club present. Hermione and Ron were there, doing stretches on the hearthrug (he hadn't given Ron's bed a glance upstairs, assuming--as before--that the snoring he heard was coming from all of the other beds). Ron was getting up early to run? he thought. Ginny was also dressed for running, making him draw in his breath (he remembered what she had looked like the other times she'd joined him and Hermione for running) and Annika Olafsdottir and Tony Perugia were present as well. What the hell--? he thought, perplexed.

"Harry?" He jerked his head up. Hermione had finished the stretches. "I didn't notice you standing there. Are you sure you want to go running this morning? We thought you might sleep in." He was touched by her look of concern.

"Why wouldn't I want to go? It's a beautiful day. I'm fine," he said, opening the portrait hole, not letting her look at him. He wouldn't have the chance to talk with her after running. The break-up would have to wait for later. Draco Malfoy met them in the entrance hall with Mariah Kirkner, and the eight of them went down to the Quidditch pitch together. Oh, that's right, Harry remembered; last summer, Malfoy started running with me. And now Mariah comes along too. That's not at *all* suspicious, he thought ruefully, wondering again whether their friendship was as innocent as they wanted others to think.

He tried to remember other morning runs from earlier in the year; all he remembered was that when he had confronted Malfoy about the Trophy Room, he had done it by going down to the entrance hall early, pulling him aside so Mariah wouldn't hear them talking. Otherwise the morning runs blended together indiscriminately in his brain. All four girls went to the girls' prefects' bathroom afterward (Harry remembered that Ginny and Mariah had become prefects in September, and the two of them plus Hermione decided that Annika had their permission to use it also, when she was with them). Ron, however went upstairs to Gryffindor Tower, and only Harry, Tony and Malfoy used the luxurious marble-lined boys' prefects' bathroom. (Harry remembered that Tony was the other

Gryffindor prefect in Ginny's year.) While he was showering, Harry also vaguely recalled some activities from the previous months: going to classes, training the elves, playing Quidditch, practicing with the Dueling Club, teaching some younger, newer members to cope with Confundus-class charms....

Professor Flitwick had taken over the club in Snape's absence. And Snape's uncle, Duncan MacDermid, had been tapped to teach Potions. Professor Sinistra was interim head of Slytherin House. All of the titles had "interim" in them. Interim Potions Master. Interim Faculty Director of the Dueling Club. Interim Head of Slytherin House. No one wanted to think Professor Snape wouldn't be coming back. Harry tried to remember what excuse Dumbledore had given the school for Snape's absence; then he recalled the notices he'd given at the welcoming feast in September. A sabbatical, he'd said. Professor Snape was on a sabbatical.

Except that he and his closest friends knew better.

Harry dressed and walked down to the Great Hall for breakfast with the other Gryffindors, lost in thought about Snape, not taking notice of the other people around him. He *really* needed to *think*....but he was rather distracted by the sight of Ginny laughing and talking animatedly as she skipped down the stairs. As he watched her beside her dorm mates (why did she seem to be in color, and other people in black-and-white?), he recalled again the glorious half minute when she had forgotten herself and kissed him back; it seemed to require a consciousness and self-discipline that had temporarily left her to pull away from him....

I am with Draco and you are with Hermione.

Did Ginny really still love him or was she staying with him out of obligation, because he had put his father in Azkaban for her? Was there anything between him and Mariah? Did Malfoy have any other friends in his own house? Harry closed his eyes and wracked his brain. *Think, think....*

It was very, very odd to walk into the cavernous Great Hall again and go to the Gryffindor, not the Slytherin, table. The ceiling overhead was cerulean blue with fluffy white clouds. For a moment, Harry allowed himself to stop worrying and he breathed in the delicious smell of the food that the elves had cooked for breakfast.

He was home.

He sat down, trying to absorb everything. Never again did he want to forget what this was like, or take it for granted. When he had been in school in Little Whinging, he had once had to read an American play in which a girl who had died returned to her family to live one day in her life again, and she pondered whether humans ever actually appreciated life

while they were living it, whether they really *noticed* everything and cherished it. He felt like he was working to memorize everything about his life now, every sound and smell and sight, every well-loved face, the timbre of each voice and laugh, even the rough texture of the scrubbed tables in the Great Hall or the smooth stones underfoot when he walked from one place to another in the castle. He would never again let himself forget this, any of it. Every detail was important.

Then, while he was drinking his tea, he looked up at the head table and noticed Dumbledore looking right at him. And he also noticed that Nearly Headless Nick was hovering next to the headmaster on his right, while the Bloody Baron was on his left. Harry swallowed. He'd forgotten about the ghosts. Would they know? Of course they would! Harry knew that he would probably eventually have to confess to Dumbledore what he'd done, but he hadn't realized it would be so soon. He wasn't a bit surprised to see the headmaster walk toward him when he was done his breakfast.

Dumbledore beamed around at the other Gryffindors and said, "Good morning, everyone. Excellent breakfast this morning, wasn't it? The kippers were a bit iffy, but--" and he shrugged, smiling. Will Flitwick, who had been about to bite into a kipper, put it down on his plate hastily, trying to look nonchalant about it. But then Dumbledore ceased the pretense that he was there for any other reason than to speak to Harry. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry--I wonder whether I could have a few words with you before you begin your classes? What do you have this morning?"

Harry opened his mouth, but he was drawing a blank. "Care of Magical Creatures, first," Ron volunteered, "then Potions." Harry realized that Ron was speaking to the headmaster with a very casual air; years ago, he'd been very intimidated by Dumbledore. Harry was glad to see that that had abated.

"Ah, then Hagrid won't mind if I borrow you for a while, will he? I'm sure he'll understand. What are you doing in his class these days?"

"Fwoopers, sir," Dean Thomas volunteered. "And some other magical birds." Harry remembered doing this early in his sixth year with Charlie. Funny, he thought; Charlie didn't seem to have simplified the curriculum like the other teachers. Then again, the Ministry in his other life may not have cared how much the students knew about magical birds, probably disregarding the class in magical creatures altogether.

"Ah, fwoopers. Fascinating creatures, fascinating. I'm sure you'll have no problem catching up Harry, hmm?"

Harry nodded and turned to follow Dumbledore; Hermione mouthed a question to him:

What's this about?

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged; although the ghosts had retreated, he had a pretty good idea. Fixing the things wrong in this life--such as putting his relationship with Hermione to rights--would have to wait. Harry followed the old wizard up to his office, smiling when he gave the password to the gargoyle: "*Pepper imps.*"

The moving spiral stairs soon deposited them outside the office door, which opened with a flourish of Dumbledore's hand. Fawkes was on his perch and spread his wings in welcome when he saw his master and Harry. Dumbledore smiled and clucked at him, giving him a morsel of bacon. Harry hadn't noticed him carrying it, so it was possible he had just conjured it up on the spur of the moment.

He waved Harry to one of the chairs before his desk and he sat, putting his fingers together and looking at Harry over the thin, crooked tips.

"I expect you know why you are here, Harry?" he said, starting to sound a little less cheerful, but not exactly confrontational.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, beginning to feel a bit apprehensive. What would Dumbledore say about changing time? Nothing good; that much was certain.

"So," he said, putting his hands down flat on the desk. "You did it." Harry swallowed.

"Yes, erm," he said uncertainly. It wasn't completely clear that he knew what Dumbledore was talking about. It might not be safe to assume. The old wizard looked at him shrewdly.

"You do know what I'm talking about, Harry? Obviously, since this is the reality in which we are all living, you did manage to fix the timelines back to the way they were. From what I have been told, it was last night that this occurred, correct?"

Harry nodded. "The--the ghosts told you? That I'd changed time?"

Dumbledore was the one who looked confused now. "No, Harry. You did. In October. They simply told me last night that you were now aware of the other life you had led."

Harry nodded. "Oh, okay. I guess if you say I told you, that means--"

"You don't remember?"

Harry frowned. "My head's sort of swimming with information right now, most of it from my--my other life. All I've managed to remember of what's

happened to me here since September is one night soon after the term began, part of Christmas day and some vague memories of going running in the mornings with my friends...."

Dumbledore looked very concerned now. "I had been planning to lecture you about changing time, but I can hardly do that now. This is serious, Harry, very serious. We need to get you to Madam Pomfrey."

"But--but--"

"None of that Harry. We can't take chances. Come with me." He lit his fire and threw some Floo powder into it, then guided Harry into the firebox with him. Harry held his glasses to his face, whirling dizzily, and when he fell out of a fireplace, he found himself in the office of a very surprised and none-too-pleased Madam Pomfrey.

"Poppy, I need you to look at Harry immediately."

She looked up from a large wizarding medical tome she'd been examining. "What's wrong?" she demanded.

"Harry is having some trouble with his memories of the last eight months or so...."

"Hmmm," she said informatively, beginning to look in Harry's eyes and ears, up his nose, down his throat, under his arms and--making him giggle in a most undignified manner--in his navel. She put her head down near his heart and tapped on his sternum with her wand; Harry felt a thrumming noise in his ears. He felt like his entire body was vibrating rapidly, every blood cell, every bacteria in his pores or under his fingernails. She said, "*Finite Incantatem*," and straightened up, looking at Dumbledore very seriously.

"Let's get him into a bed."

Harry felt positively hustled into the infirmary, and soon he was sitting on one of the beds while Madam Pomfrey poked and prodded him some more, Dumbledore standing near the foot of the bed, his chin in one hand thoughtfully. Finally, she nodded at Dumbledore and retreated to her office again without a word to Harry, who looked up at the headmaster quizzically.

"Is all this really necessary, Professor? Can't we just talk instead?"

"Talk? *Talk*? You want to *talk*, Harry?" Harry cowered back again his pillows, seeing a Dumbledore he'd only encountered once before; the stern, forbidding wizard who had entered the office for the Defense of Dark Arts teacher when he discerned that the man he'd thought was Mad Eye Moody was an impostor and that Harry might be in grave danger.

What Harry had never seen was that ire directed against *him*, and he was startled by it.

"Harry, how could you let him manipulate you that way?" Harry swallowed to keep from crying. He had never thought of seeing that look on Dumbledore's face, not directed at him. He felt more miserable than when the door to his cell in Azkaban had closed on him.

"I'm--I'm sorry sir. I can't excuse it. I--I can only tell you how it happened. Voldemort--he managed to give me nightmares during the summer. Through my scar. I wasn't sleeping for almost two straight months. I--I wasn't thinking very clearly. And then he told me about my sister...."

"Yes. You told me all this in October."

"I--I did?"

"Yes." He turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Please excuse us, Poppy." She looked a bit miffed, but retreated to her office. He turned back to Harry. "You didn't tell me very much...just that Voldemort had taken you back in time to the night your parents were killed and suggested that you might save your mother and sister, and you didn't because you met another version of yourself, a Harry Potter who said he'd lived in another reality for fifteen years because he *had* saved his mother and changed time..."

Harry tried very hard to remember October, with no success. "Did I tell you anything else, sir?"

"Only that you wouldn't remember that life until some time in May."

Harry nodded. "Except--I wish there was some way for me to have fixed things and *not* remember...."

Dumbledore sat on the edge of the bed, the fearsome look gone, replaced by concern. "You know what they say, Harry. Those who do not remember history are doomed to repeat it." Harry nodded; he'd heard that many times, but it had never had such meaning for him before. Now Dumbledore came closer to him and put his hands on his temples. "I will help you to remember Harry. We need you to be fully functional. Let's start with September first, shall we?"

Harry nodded, the old wrinkled fingers touching his head lightly. He closed his eyes as Dumbledore mumbled an incantation, and Harry felt himself floating through his own mind, searching for the right day, the right memories, for the day when the world had changed....

After he'd looked in the window of his house, he turned to Voldemort. "I can't save them both?" he whispered

desperately, his heart aching. The other wizard shook his head grimly. He looked at his father through the window again. "I don't want to see him die," Harry said, his voice catching. "How long do we have to wait?"

The older man looked at the sky. "Not long now." His answer was terse and quiet. Harry shivered; it was a cold night. Smoke billowed from the stone chimney, hinting at the warmth and comfort inside the modest house. Harry's heart was beating faster and faster...

They hid near the fence in the front garden. They hadn't been hiding for very long when he suddenly heard a strange voice behind him whisper, "Impedimenta!" He turned, wincing as some thorns pierced his leg, and he saw that Voldemort was standing stock-still beside him. What was going on? He squinted into the darkness. Someone was standing in the road, his wand out. Harry gawked.

It was him.

But it couldn't be me, he thought. The only other me here right now is a baby, inside the house....

He did what his instincts told him and pulled out his wand, saying, "Expelliarmus!" But the other him leapt out of the way and pointed his wand, saying, "Stupefy!"

He had no room to physically maneuver, no way to get out of the way of the spell. He felt himself fall into darkness. He was aware of nothing. It seemed quite sudden, as though no time had passed, when was abruptly wakened. He remembered Hermione saying that when she had been abducted, it was as though she had been "turned off," like a light switch. He didn't care for the sensation at all. He blinked; he was lying on the ground, some uncomfortable sticks under him, and damp leaves. He was looking up at a canopy of dark trees; faint moonlight filtering through the branches. He was frightened and unsure what to think. Was this another trick of Voldemort's?

He sat up slowly, staring at the other him, thinking furiously about what to do next. He took note of the fact that his wand was no longer in his hand; he saw the other Harry holding two wands. It wasn't in his pocket, then. Maybe he could just physically attack the other person; he didn't look as fit as Harry felt he probably was. I can probably take him, he thought. He wouldn't know what hit him, and I could get my wand back in a trice....

The other him looked taken aback by his determined expression. "Dinnae be alairmed," he said quickly. "Please, jest listen to whoot I have to say." Harry glared at the other him, not feeling very trusting. Whoever it was--perhaps someone who'd taken Polyjuice Potion?--he was Scottish. Why did he think he could masquerade as him when he had a Scottish accent?

"Who are you?" he said simply.

Grasping a wand in each hand, he swallowed. "I'm you. If ye change the timelines, I'm you. Actually, ye did change the timelines. Ye did it once, anyway, last Septaimber. I've lived in anoother wairld, in another reality since then. Or rather, you have. Or rather, I've lived in it for the last fifteen-and-a-half yairs. But--it's wrong. And it's been vairy hard for me to manage to get back here, but now I am, and it's vairy important that ye let things play out tonight as they did the fairst time, when both of your--our--parents were killt," he stammered awkwardly. "It all has to go back. All of the things that have happened in the new timeline....It's all wrong. None of it should aiver have bean. I know it seemed--" his voice caught "--it seemed like you were savin' a life. Savin' yer mother's and yer sister's lives, that is. But--but ye jest have to acsaint that they're gone."

Harry didn't feel any more trusting after this speech. He nodded at the wands. "You have my wand," he said stiffly.

"Yes, wail--ye tried to attack me back there by the cottage. I couldnae take any chances. Will ye please listen ta me fer a minute? Then I'll give it back ta ye, I promise."

Harry reached up and touched the scar on his forehead, then looked at the smooth forehead of the person confronting him. "You don't have a scar," he said softly. "And you sound strange." That was the nicest way he could put it.

The other him touched his smooth forehead. "When Mum wasn't killt by Voldemort, it was because she promised me ta him. He put an Obedience Chairm on me. He put it on Draco Malfoy, too. And we lived in Hogsmeade. I grew up there, so I sound Scottish."

He thought about all this; if he had a choice, he'd far rather believe that he was actually talking to a Harry Potter who had lived in another life in Scotland for over fifteen years, rather than some sinister person who had somehow traveled through time to the exact same time as him and Voldemort, disguised

as him, but not getting it quite right. In fact, most people would have wanted to get it right down to the last small freckle or blemish, and certainly the same accent. Harry nodded, feeling less inclined to try to find a way to physically attack the other Harry.

The scarless Harry was looking at him, very distressed. He felt a bit guilty. Had he created another world by interfering in his mother's death? He was still feeling extremely fatigued and judgment-impaired from his lack of sleep. "I--I wanted to tell him no. I really did. But when he said Mum had been expecting a baby--"

"I know, I know," the scarless Harry said softly "And Jamie was a wonderful sister...."

"Jamie?"

"Mum named her after our father."

He choked. "Then--then how can you just let her and Mum die out there?" he demanded, his voice going up.

"Sssh! B'cause--" The other him paused, then took a deep breath. "B'cause they're alraidy daid. And there's more bad besides that, things that aren't jest about my life. The wairld is--well, I won't tell ye right now. When the day comes, sometime in May, that I come back to your wairld, ye'll remaimber ever'thin' then. I think it's baiter that ye don' know right now. Mebbe you'll have something like a normal time in school this yair..."

He smirked. "Normal. What's that?"

The other Harry smiled agreement. He pushed up his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes, aware of the other Harry watching him do it. Sitting here with himself was rather eerie. He settled his glasses on his nose again, then ran his fingers over his scar for a second. "What now?" he asked his other self.

"Now," the scarless Harry told him, "we wait. With no interfairence, ever'thin' should be as it was b'fore. We have ta stay oot o' the way and wait for ever'thin' that's supposed ta happen."

He looked down, then up again. "I'm sorry. Has it been rough?"

In response, the other Harry pulled up his left sleeve, revealing the mark that had been magically burned into the skin there. He drew his breath in sharply. He had become a Death Eater! He asked when it had happened, and the other Harry told him that it was at the winter solstice, that Draco had been done at the same time, and when he asked about calling him "Draco," he was informed that they were both in Slytherin and had been best friends since they were "wee."

Best friends! He remembered the revelations at Mrs. Figg's. Then he smiled. "Wee?" he said, smiling. His other self grimaced. "Best friends, huh? Well, I suppose Mrs. Figg didn't need to put memory charms on the two of you."

"No; but I'm used t' callin' 'er Nanny Bella here."

Harry shook his head. "This is so strange. And in a few months--"

"More than eight, actually."

"In about eight months, I'm suddenly going to remember all this?"

The scarless Harry nodded. "On September fairst, I suddenly found meself in my bairroom in Hogsmeade with fifteen yairs worth o' maim'ries. They were a little hard to get at, at the beginnin', but eventually it became easier. Ye might want t' ask Sirius for your own Pensieve, just to get raidy fer May. It might be easier in the long run, to put some of this life in a sort of saip'rare place. But a place where you could still-- experience the maim'ries."

He agreed to this, although he thought he would only want to put a few memories into it. They were both silent for a while, listening to the wind in the trees. He reached for his basilisk pendant and fingered it lightly, closing his eyes, holding it, feeling the usual peace and calm come over him, but now, slowly, a picture also came into his mind; a slightly plump red-haired woman, holding a squirming red-haired bundle on her lap, wrapped in a towel. The baby was pink and clean, fresh from the bath. That's odd, he thought. I've never seen anything before when I've held the pendant....The image of the mother and child was slightly fuzzy, though. He wasn't sure who they were....

He thought of something else the other him had said, and opened his eyes. He looked intently at the other boy and said, "Slytherin?"

He had startled him. The other Harry looked up suddenly, saying, "What?"

"You said you--I mean we--I mean--" he sighed, getting all twisted up in pronouns. "Slytherin. You said Slytherin. How did that happen?"

He watched himself shrug, and then he got the explanation about the sorting order, and Draco going into Slytherin, and the hat giving him a choice.

"Again?"

"Yes. And I also wanted ta be in Slytherin b'cause my da--" He could see that he had stopped himself for some reason. "Er," the other Harry said, trying to recover. "There were other reasons, too." Harry frowned; the other boy was hiding something, but what?

But he had too many other questions. He asked about Ron and Hermione, and the scarless Harry grimaced and explained that Ron wasn't his friend, since he was a Slytherin and Ron was a Gryffindor prefect, likely to become Head Boy the following year. Head Boy! he thought, remembering Ron looking into the Mirror of Erised in their first year. His heart's desire...

And then there were some cryptic comments about Hermione, and the other Harry seemed reluctant to continue to talk.

"Leesten, I don' think I should tell ye any more. Too much has happened in the last fifteen yairs fer me ta be able ta jest tail ye aboot it. It'll be easier whain ye can jest acsaiss the maim'ries yersailf. I'm afraid I'll tail ever'thin' oot o' order an' confuse ye...."

They were silent, and again he reached instinctively for his basilisk amulet. Suddenly he looked up and noticed that the scarless Harry was holding something too. "What's that you've got there?" He opened his hand and showed it to him silently. "Where did you get it?"

The other him laughed. "If I told ye, ye wouldnae believe it. I noticed ye were smilin' when ye held it. Did ye--see anythin'?"

"Yeah, I did. Usually I just feel sort of calm and comforted, but this time I saw something. I never did before. It was very faint...."

"Was it Mrs. Weasley? With a baby?"

*His jaw dropped. That must have been who the woman was.
"Yes!"*

The other him nodded. "I saw the same thin', but mine wasn't faint. It was very clair." Looking like it was a sudden impulse, the scarless Harry took off the amulet, holding it out. "Take it. Here."

He hesitated, then reached out for it, making sure their hands did not touch. He looked up into the face of the scarless Harry. "Why?"

"Jest--if you manage to make it back with it, give it to someone ailse."

"Who?"

He hesitated. "I cannae tell ye that. Ye have ta decide. But ye'll know when the time is right."

He held up the amulet that had been resting on his sternum and compared the two. "They're identical."

"No, they're not. They're actually the same amulet. There's only one in each wairld. That's why I'm not sure ye can take that one back, but it's wairth a try."

He stared in fascination at the second amulet. Then he pocketed it. "You need to give me something else," he said.

"Oh; right." The scarless Harry handed the wand back to him, which he also put in his pocket. They turned their faces toward the cottage in unison, ever so subtly holding their breaths, waiting, waiting....

When it finally happened, they both jumped. They heard James Potter shouting his wife's name and his son's name, too. They began creeping cautiously through the trees. "Do nothing," his other self told him. He nodded. They reached the edge of the trees; they could see the side of the cottage where the chimney was, and they could dimly make out the figure of Voldemort, still under the Impediment Charm. They saw the front door fly open and Lily Potter run into the garden in her night dress, carrying the baby, who was crying non-stop. He heard his father scream as he was being tortured and they both instinctively covered their ears.

Everything happened so fast after that; the green light flashed in the window of the cottage, the roof went flying into the

air....Voldemort stepped purposefully out the front door of the house. Flames were clearly visible through the windows flanking the chimney, and he reached out without thinking and grasped his other self's wrist while he stared at the flames, tears running down his face.

His mother pleaded with the dark wizard, "Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry," and he called her a silly girl and told her to stand aside. She sank to her knees.

Harry waited for her next words. She needed to say them, or the timeline wouldn't be fixed. He watched, his heart in his throat, waiting, waiting....Harry knew what was coming next; he'd heard it in his head before.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead--" That was it. She'd said it. Harry couldn't see straight; Voldemort was going to do it, he was going to kill her. Harry couldn't bear it, he couldn't not do something...And yet, he knew that he should not. He was holding onto his own wrist, the evidence for why nothing should be changed. He willed himself to comply, gripping that wrist tighter and tighter, so he couldn't get out his wand and do it, change the world....

And in the end, he let it happen. His mother was lying dead at the madman's feet, then the terrible words were uttered again and the curse rebounded upon Voldemort, who uttered that other-worldly cry before his body dissolved, became less than spirit, and his wand dropped to the ground and the thing which Voldemort had become flew up into the air, and blew over the trees where they lurked, still wailing that terrible cry. After a few minutes they dared to uncover their ears; they saw Peter Pettigrew take Voldemort's wand (for Harry was certain that was who it was) and run off in rat form to live at the Weasley's house for thirteen years. He saw Severus Snape run through the garden gate and go to his knees by the side of his beloved Lily, taking her in his arms. Harry backed away from his other self, then went running through the trees. The scarless Harry hadn't noticed.

He turned to look back. Then a familiar voice behind him said, "Harry."

He whirled. Damn! The Impediment Curse that the scarless Harry had put on Voldemort had worn off, and the wizard had Apparated into the trees. He wondered whether Voldemort realized who had put the curse on him. The dark wizard did not look pleased.

"Are you sure you don't want to join me, Harry?" he said silkily. "After all, someone who could just watch his mother and sister be killed like that...."

He remembered seeing the Dark Mark on the other boy's arm--his arm. He trembled with rage. To suggest that because he didn't think it right to change things that meant he didn't care....

"No! I'll never join you. Never! It's not right to change past events!"

He clutched his wand and braced himself, standing on the balls of his feet, ready to spring out of the way of a curse or hex at a moment's notice. Voldemort raised his wand, his face angrier than Harry had ever seen it...

Then suddenly he felt as though a rug on which he'd been standing had been pulled out from underneath him quite violently, and he felt himself falling, falling, falling, falling.....

....onto Platform Nine-and-Three Quarters. Harry winced as he landed on the hard concrete, shaking his head to clear it. His scar was throbbing slightly. He glanced up, seeing that the Hogwarts Express was still there! Only--it wouldn't be soon. The train was moving! He scrambled to his feet and ran, and with a wild leap, he landed on the caboose platform, panting and dizzy, unable to believe that he'd really seen everything he'd seen....

Voldemort had talked him into doing a tandem spell. Well, he thought, that's never going to happen again... He'd talked to himself, a self that had lived the last fifteen years in another world because Harry had changed the timelines, in one version of reality....

He was starting to get a splitting headache, thinking about it....And then he realized that it was actually his scar that was making his head feel like it was splitting....He cried out, going to his knees, trying to keep hold of the rail so he wouldn't topple off the train. Through the pain in his head, he saw Voldemort at the cottage in Godric's Hollow, and he looked enraged. He pointed his wand at the cottage and cried, "Incendio!" What was left of the small building burst into flames, vines and all, and Harry cried out in anguish. Everything would be gone; the Welsh dresser, the blue and white teapot, everything....Voldemort would probably even salt the earth....

He lay before the caboose door, winded, as the pain passed. Finally, he rose and opened the door, surprising the wizard who worked in there. Harry nodded at him as he went through.

"Almost missed the train," he said feebly to him, his head still achy. The wizard gawked at him, especially at his forehead, clearly recognizing him. Harry moved on quickly, walking down the corridor past the other compartments until he reached the one he and Ron and Hermione usually chose. He opened the door, finding them there with Draco Malfoy and Ginny as well. Hermione leapt up and threw her arms around him.

"Oh! There you are! We were so worried you'd missed the train! What happened?"

He pried her hands from around his neck and looked nervously at the others; even Malfoy looked concerned. He sat down opposite him and the two Weasleys, Hermione by his side. "It's--it's a bit hard to explain. I blame my lack of sleep. I really need to take a nap..."

Ron looked at him guiltily. "I thought--I thought you might still be hacked off at me..." he mumbled. Harry furrowed his brow, then remembered the things Ron had said when he'd told Harry to break up with Hermione. The things he'd seen in Godric's Hollow had made all of that fly right out of his head. He was still hacked off at Ron. He opened his mouth for a second, but he didn't have a chance to respond before Hermione began speaking again. She had moved to the edge of the long seat.

"Well, just lie down here and put your head on me. I can still talk to the others. You're sure we won't keep you awake?"

He shook his head, putting his hand into his pocket, checking to make sure he had his wand, just in case...but he didn't find just his wand. His hand closed over the metal amulet. He withdrew his hand quickly. He could feel the other one around his neck. It had worked....He'd brought back the other amulet....

He sank down onto the seat, lowering his head onto Hermione's robes and closing his eyes. "Just do me a favor this term, all right? If any of you think I haven't been getting enough sleep, just say so and make me go take a nap or something if I start yawning...."

He opened his eyes and looked up at Dumbledore. "I remembered it. From this end." He tried to explain what had happened to the headmaster, who nodded when Harry told him about what happened to the cottage in Godric's Hollow. "I heard about that fire. I wondered what all that was about. He also fired the Dark Mark into the air afterward. He must have been quite enraged that he hadn't been able to convince you to save your mother. After all, it was her death which seemed to lead to his fall...."

"Except--he *did* convince me. The first time. But then--I convinced myself not to do it the second time round."

They were both silent. Harry thought more about the beginning of the term in September. He had initially been surprised to see Duncan MacDermid sitting next to Professor Dumbledore at the head table, and pleased to see Remus Lupin, who would once again serve as the teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Unfortunately, the absence of Professor Snape produced a little problem that Dumbledore hadn't been anticipating; without Snape on hand to brew Lupin's Wolfsbane Potion, the werewolf had to resort to his old habit of going to the Shrieking Shack three nights a month, where the residents of Hogsmeade were once again terrorized by the sounds of his agony and anguish. MacDermid just didn't feel up to brewing the complicated potion. He had been working on learning how to do it since October, but he had yet to get it right, and did not wish for Lupin to take the risk of drinking a concoction which could expose him to far too much wolfsbane and make him quite ill.

Sirius came almost every month to keep his old friend company, and to prevent him from hurting himself too badly, but once when Sirius couldn't come (he was working as an operative and was in the middle of a sensitive mission) Harry had received permission to accompany him in his golden griffin form (he transfigured after he entered the tunnel under the Whomping Willow). He remembered now how touched and honored he had felt that Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore allowed him to do this, to fill a role that his own father had filled as Prongs, keeping his friend company in the midst of his unwanted monthly sojourn as a dark creature....

Snape's absence had affected people in so many ways. He was greatly missed. Harry looked up at Dumbledore. "Where is he?" he whispered. "Is he--"

"Who, Harry?"

"Snape."

"Ah. Is he dead? Is that what you are asking?" Harry nodded miserably. Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't think so. You'll remember this on your own eventually, but I'll tell you now. He's being held prisoner. By Wormtail. He was discovered in some tunnels he knew of near Dover--"

Harry opened his eyes wide. "The old magazine and battery!"

"How on earth do you know about--" he began, then thought better of it. "At any rate, during a Death Eater meeting which Severus was monitoring, he put a charm on himself to increase his hearing, so he would know everything that was being said without being close enough to be discovered. However, he in fact was discovered by Wormtail, who changed into a rat after the meeting, preparing to leave in that form. He immediately picked up on a familiar scent--Severus Snape. He followed the scent to his hiding place. Severus, for his part, had returned his hearing to normal after the meeting, so he didn't detect Wormtail's approach.

"Wormtail held him prisoner there in his own hiding place for some time, torturing him to try to get him to tell about the other operatives. He might have used Veritaserum to find out what he wanted, but he would have had to leave to acquire some. He might also have had Severus brew it himself, but again, Wormtail would have needed to leave to acquire the ingredients, and he would have felt it likely in any case that Severus would purposely botch the preparation. Why should he do it correctly? However, I happen to know that even had Wormtail possessed some Veritaserum to extract the information from him, it would not have worked, for Severus has done something that not many people know about...."

"What?" Harry whispered.

"Over the years, knowing how potent his own Veritaserum is, he guarded against others being able to use it against him, and he took measured amounts of it, over time, and learned to lie quite fluently even under the influence of the strongest version of the potion. He built up an immunity to it. Wormtail may have guessed, he may not--but Veritaserum is utterly useless if you are attempting to extract information from Severus Snape."

Harry nodded; that would be like Snape. He smiled just a little; it had never occurred to him to try to build up immunity to a powerful potion like Veritaserum.

"Wormtail didn't inform Voldemort," Dumbledore continued, "hoping to bring him the information when he'd broken Severus, presenting it as a *fait accompli*. Severus didn't give him the satisfaction, and in December, he managed to overcome Wormtail and escape. He Apparated to Diagon Alley and wrote to me, telling me what had occurred. He managed to hide in Diagon Alley for more than two weeks, hoping Wormtail would forget about him, in case he might attempt to waylay him on his way back to the castle, since Severus couldn't Apparate back here; he would only be able to get as far as Hogsmeade.

"Finally, he felt that it was probably safe to Apparate to the village and he was evidently on his way back to the castle--but Wormtail had greater patience than he anticipated. He had been waiting by the roadside, in his rat form, all the time Severus had been gone, and when he appeared, Wormtail captured him again. This time he kept him prisoner with another wizard's help--I do not know who it was or where they were, or whether this other wizard helped to capture Professor Snape--and Wormtail began a slower torture process, presided over by the other wizard. Evidently, Wormtail hoped to break down his defenses and create a bond of trust between the two of them to extract the information he wanted.

"Imperius and Cruciatus were out of the question from the start. Wormtail had eliminated them as useful during the first time he'd been holding him prisoner. Severus is adept at resisting Imperius, and Wormtail didn't want to risk Cruciatus causing too much brain damage for him to be useful. They have engaged in actual physical torture--non-magical--to get him to cooperate--"

"What?" Harry finally said. He felt oddly proud of Snape for resisting Imperius and withstanding the pain of Cruciatus. "What have they done to him?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Wormtail sends me letters. That is how I know this. He would like me to give in and tell him what Severus will not. However, as much as I would like to spare Severus more suffering, I think instead that the moment Wormtail has the information he wants, he would simply kill Severus. He would no longer be of any use to him. He moves around quite a bit, as a rat, while the other wizard does the torture. Several times they have somehow found out when we are close to finding them, and have moved at unpredictable times."

Harry put his hand up to stop the headmaster. He was remembering something now. Sirius, his head in the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room, telling Harry about Arabella Figg's desperate ride on a broomstick, following a post owl with a letter they'd addressed to Snape. She didn't manage to keep up with the owl (post owls are far faster than the fastest broomstick), but from a distance, she saw where the owl appeared to go to deliver its letter....A large manor house, to all appearances abandoned and run-down, near the town of Little Hangleton. But when she Apparated to Fletcher and Sirius, so that they could join her, they arrived at the manor house too late. The owl was still there, sans the letter which had been on his leg, picking at a full plate of food which had been abandoned.

Soon after, another owl arrived from Wormtail, congratulating them on finding their former hiding place....Sirius seemed to be genuinely concerned for Snape's safety, and told Harry that he hoped that having to keep one step ahead of the operatives at least gave Wormtail less opportunity to torture the Potions Master. Unfortunately, Harry knew, all of the effort that the operatives had been expending to find Snape had

meant that numerous Death Eater attacks--mostly on Squibs and households with mixed wizard-Muggle families--went undetected until they were history. There weren't enough Aurors to keep up with the attacks. More than one student at the school had been summoned to the headmaster's office and given the horrifying news that their home had been attacked, their parents killed or maimed....

"Wormtail takes a great deal of pleasure in writing to me and detailing everything that they are doing to him." Harry noticed that Dumbledore's hand was shaking visibly as he pushed his half-moon glasses up his nose.

Harry swallowed. Snape had been tortured for months! And yet, it seemed, he hadn't broken. Harry felt strangely moved. Who else could have withstood what he had? Who else would resist telling what he knew? "What did they do to him?" he whispered.

He had never seen Dumbledore so clearly distressed, although he was trying very hard to hide it. "Just recently, I received with a letter--" He stopped. Unable to go on. Then Harry remembered; Dumbledore had already told him.

"A finger," Harry said softly. Wormtail had relished this, evidently, as he had cut off his own finger to avoid capture and frame Sirius Black for the betrayal of James and Lily Potter, as well as the murder of a street full of Muggles. Dumbledore nodded.

"You are starting to remember things on your own."

"I started to remember some things last night, like I said, but I still don't really feel like I'm completely in this life...."

Dumbledore moved toward the office door. "I will see how Poppy is coming with that potion. It will help you to remember more." He disappeared into the office. Harry bit his lip with apprehension.

Wormtail had cut off one of Snape's fingers...

This couldn't be allowed to continue. It was too horrible. He knew what had to be done. It was up to him. When the headmaster returned, trailed by Madam Pomfrey, who was carrying a steaming beaker, Harry immediately put forth his proposal.

"Professor--I know what we can do to get him back."

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. "I do too, Harry. We can tell him what he wants. But that would put all of the other operatives at risk."

"We'll make a deal with Wormtail."

"A deal? What kind of a deal?" He looked like he didn't care for the idea.

"A trade."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Wormtail isn't asking for ransom."

"Not money. Or goods. Me. We'll offer him me. I'll take Snape's place."

Dumbledore sat on the hospital bed. "Harry, you don't know what you're saying...."

"Yes, I do," he said, trying not to choke as he remembered the man who had raised him, as he thought of him being tortured for months on end. "I want to do this. I need to. I got away from Voldemort once; I can get away again."

"How, Harry? You had a Portkey at your disposal then. You don't know how to Apparate, and it would be illegal for you to learn until you turn seventeen. I won't allow it. Severus knew what the risks were, and I trust him implicitly."

He lifted his chin. "You forgot--I accompanied Professor Lupin in February--" he said softly, one eye on Madam Pomfrey, who seemed intent in making certain the potion did not overflow the container.

"That is a talent which he *knows about*," Dumbledore said, obliquely, also sliding his eyes in Madam Pomfrey's direction. She sighed and put the potion on the table next to the bed.

"Since you are once again feeling that you cannot discuss some things openly while I am here, I will return to the Apothecary. I have work to do," she said with a slightly injured tone. Dumbledore watched her go without comment. He did not deny her assessment of the situation.

Once she was gone, Harry said, "He thinks I'm a lion. He doesn't know I'm a golden griffin. And I can do the pain blocking."

Dumbledore looked at him sternly. "If he starts removing *your* fingers, can you grow them back?"

"Erm," Harry said, trying not to feel ill at the thought. Dumbledore patted his arm.

"Drink your potion, then go to sleep. It will help you to remember."

"What kind of potion is it?"

"Mnemonis Potion."

"What?" Harry practically screeched. "Isn't that what Neville--"

"Yes, he abused it. This is a carefully controlled dosage prepared expertly by Poppy. No one will allow you to become addicted. Do not worry. It has its uses. Anything which is this useful is also open to being abused. If you do not take matters into your own hands, you will not have a problem."

Harry nodded and carefully lifted the beaker to his lips, trying not to make a face like a five-year-old eating Brussels sprouts as he drank the vile stuff. *How had Neville become dependant on this?* he wondered. *Did he take another potion to destroy his taste-buds first?*

Then he had a vivid picture of both of his brothers learning to tolerate the vile taste of Porphyry Potion....

"Porphyry Potion!" he said excitedly. Dumbledore had been starting to go, but now he swung around.

"What did you say?"

"Snape has Porphyria. If Wormtail hasn't been giving him Porphyry Potion, he could become very ill...."

Dumbledore nodded. "Severus always carried some of his potion with him. And Wormtail wants him for information, so he will not have let Severus become ill, I think. Get some rest Harry...."

Then Harry thought of something else; suddenly his mind was racing. Was it the Mnemonis Potion? "The forest!"

"What about the forest?"

"Why didn't Snape come back to Hogwarts through the forest? Wormtail wouldn't have been able to get him then. He was on the road from the village, you said. Snape should have gone to Gartly, then walked through the Clash--"

"The Clash? You know about the Clashindarroch Forest --"

"Really being the Forbidden Forest? Yes. I--" He lowered his voice. "I escaped from Azkaban in my golden griffin form--"

"*You were in Azkaban?*" Dumbledore looked shocked, the first time Harry had ever seen him so.

"That's not my point. I went to Gartly, to the pub, which backs up onto the forest. I went through there, and of course I didn't have any trouble with the Muggle-repelling charms that form the border between the Muggle world and the magical world. Snape should have done that to get

back here instead of Apparating to Hogwarts and walking from the village...."

Dumbledore furrowed his brow. "Very few wizards know where Hogwarts really is, Harry. Most took the train when they were children, then once they learned to Apparate, they did that to reach the village, taking the Floo network if they couldn't Apparate and following the Hogwarts train line--undetectable by Muggles--if they flew here by broomstick. Only a few of us know that the Forbidden Forest and the Clash are one and the same."

Harry smiled. "That's how we'll get Wormtail to trust us."

Dumbledore did not look happy about this. "How?"

"Like I said, we'll offer me for Snape. We'll tell him how to get into the forest from Gartly, and to make sure he and this other wizard bring Snape. But we won't *really* be offering a trade--it'll be an ambush. It's about time we showed what we've got. There are the teachers, the Dueling Club, the elves, Hagrid's mum and the other giants are still out there in the forest....We'll throw everything we've got at them, until we get Snape back and--" He caught his breath. "--and we'll capture Wormtail and get him to clear Sirius!"

He grinned at the headmaster, who appeared to be pondering the plan. "I don't like Death Eaters knowing how to get to Hogwarts through the forest. Of course, the forest has perils of its own--"

"And we'll have safety in numbers. It'll be brilliant! And if you need something else to tempt Wormtail with, besides promising him me--"

"What?"

Harry paused. "Tell him--I know who the heir is, and what he's for. Tell Wormtail I will *tell* the heir--all I would need to do is send him owl post--and then he'll know he's being used. I--I don't think Voldemort knows how the heir can be *really* useful because it was Barty Crouch, Jr. who knew, and he's been kissed by a dementor now....Of course, I suppose he could have told Voldemort before that, but even if he did, I don't think Voldemort has done the ritual yet," he said breathlessly; his head was starting to hurt from the thoughts tumbling through it so quickly. "I don't remember everything yet, but if that had happened, I'm sure my scar would have hurt a great deal, and that it would be pretty unforgettable."

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's head and gently pushed him back onto the pillow. "Rest and remember, Harry. Your mind is running away from you a bit at the moment. I will think about your suggestion. All Wormtail would have to do is refuse, and we would be right back where we were."

"But tell him I'll take Snape's place! And that if he doesn't agree, I'll tell the heir--"

"Yes, yes. I heard you. It may be worth a try. I will contact some of the other operatives and consult with them and get back to you. I will check with you soon; I do not think you should miss all of your classes today, but you should probably not get up until it is time for lunch."

Harry nodded agreement and closed his eyes, hearing the headmaster leave the Infirmary. Dumbledore had to agree; he just *had* to. He could do it, Harry knew he could; he felt a power moving restlessly through his veins as he pondered the details of the plan, and the desired outcomes.

Wormtail would go to prison and Sirius would be cleared.

The heir would not be sacrificed, would not wreak havoc on behalf of Voldemort, and his death would not strengthen his grandfather. And most importantly--

Harry would save his dad.

Chapter Nineteen

Battle Cry

Harry stared up at the ceiling of the infirmary. His mind was racing like a rocket, zooming all over, throwing out more ideas and memories than he could process. He took a deep breath and tried to focus on one memory. There; he had it. He was getting the beginning of the autumn term back....

They were in Greenhouse #6, for the most advanced students. Only sixth- and seventh-years used this one. The plants were more dangerous than those in the other greenhouses, and, in some cases, more likely to be used in dangerous potions or salves the knowledge of which was restricted to older students or even, sometimes, professors.

*The sixth-year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs had been assigned to prune night-blooming plants called Flowering Giant Tarragon (*Erechtheus dracunculoides gigantes*) which were slumbering nicely and had all of their spiny, white mouth-like blooms closed, as it was the middle of the afternoon. Harry was very uneasy about the possibility that the eight-foot-tall plant he was sharing with Ron might be sentient, and hoped the pruning wouldn't waken it from its nap. It's just like getting a little haircut, he thought of saying to it, should it become aware of what they were doing. (Could the thing understand English? he wondered.) Except that it was more*

like a multiple amputation.

As they pruned the extra growth, they had to use their wands to quickly cauterize both the stump on the plant and on the piece they'd trimmed, as Professor Sprout was putting the pruned bits into a crate to be delivered to Madam Pomfrey after the class. The ends of the pruned pieces needed to be cauterized to keep the sap from pouring out, which was very similar to the most corrosive stomach acid and extremely valuable for a variety of potions with medical applications. It was also used for etching runes into obsidian--for making valuable protective amulets--and as one of the ingredients in Wolfsbane Potion, as were many other nocturnal plants. Ron was wearing dragon-hide gloves that would be impervious to the acid, should any fall on him.

Harry eyed the large closed blooms nervously as he worked; he was very glad he was not required to be present at midnight, which was when they opened. Professor Sprout had said you could set your watch by it. Some of the seventh-years had to come late at night to feed the plants, when they opened. They were said to spit their acid at the creatures (freshly-slaughtered game killed by Hagrid) that were brought for them to eat, and their "meals" would start breaking down before they were even gathered inside the spiny-toothed maws. They were supposed to be especially aggressive during the full moon, when the seventh-years would leave the food at around eleven o'clock and run swiftly back to the castle before any blossoms opened prematurely. Harry was starting to miss the Blast-Ended Skrewts, and wondering whether he could drop Herbology and take up something nice and safe like Ancient Runes. (Alas, he knew he couldn't drop it; it wasn't an elective.)

Next to him, Ron was holding a machete-like knife at the ready while Harry held his wand poised to do the cauterization. Since one didn't want to use the non-dominant hand for either the knife or the wand, it was a two-man job. Wands didn't work very well in the left hand if you were right handed, and Harry shuddered at the thought of a greenhouse full of people using the machete-sized blades with their non-dominant hands.

SWISH! went Ron's blade. Harry was already pointing his wand and now he cried, "Kauterion!" He moved the wand quickly to the plant stump from the amputated section, the arc of crackling light following, as he made sure the cuts were thoroughly sealed. In moments it was as though a hot iron

had seared both. Harry ended the spell and the plant flinched. His stomach clenched nervously, ready to lunge out of the way should it awake....

He noticed Ron smirking at him. "Scared?" Harry wanted to hex him.

"You're not?"

Ron shrugged. "It's just a flower. A really big flower, but a flower."

"I don't know many flowers that could eat me for breakfast. Just don't wake it, all right?"

Ron laughed, then dropped the cauterized stem into a basket, the knife hanging easily by his side. "You are scared."

"Yeah, well, it's well known that stupid people don't have the sense to be scared by dangerous things...." he retorted, starting to get angry and trying to rein himself in. But Ron laughed.

"If that's the kind of thing you said to Dudley much, no wonder he beat you up constantly when you were kids...."

That was it. Harry didn't care if Ron was holding something that could skin a hippogriff alive. He pointed his wand at him, shaking. "You do not mention him, ever. Do you hear me?"

Ron looked surprised, then grimaced. "Right. Sorry," he said quietly, looking genuinely contrite. Harry backed off, lowering his wand. He was surprised Ron apologized so quickly. He had made a careless remark about Dudley--something he'd done many times before the previous June, with impunity--not thinking about how guilty Harry still felt about his death. It had been less than three months. They had both carried the coffin on their shoulders to the graveyard. Ron had been my friend then, Harry thought. What was he now?

They continued working, an unspoken detente between them. At length, Harry noticed Ron looking at where Hermione was working with Neville, wielding her wand expertly while Neville, in his own expert way, cleanly cut the extraneous growth from their plant. Ron wasn't ogling her; instead, he seemed to be checking that she wasn't checking on them. He said quietly to Harry, "I have an idea for Hermione's birthday present. Something we could get her together."

Harry looked up, startled. Together? It was Thursday, and Hermione's birthday was Monday. He hadn't thought of anything at all, and if he didn't agree to go in with Ron, he'd probably be empty-handed on Monday. Reluctantly, he asked quietly, "What is it?"

Ron told him what he wanted to do; Harry immediately knew it was perfect, but inside he was seething that he hadn't thought of it. He swallowed. "Why couldn't you do it yourself? Why include me? I mean--I'll do it, but I'm just wondering--why?"

Ron shuffled his feet a little. "Pigwidgeon is hopeless for anything big. And you know these school owls. They're almost as bad, some of them. I know of one that might be able to handle part of it, a large eagle-owl that likes to sit up in the very top of the Owlery. But we'll need to use Hedwig, too. Between the two of them, they should be able to get it here all right. I don't want to ask someone who's not used to owls to handle more than two, though. They'll have a hard enough time getting Hedwig and the other owl rigged up with the package."

Harry pondered this; it was true. He looked at Ron suspiciously again.

"What made you think of this?"

He shrugged. "Oh--just something Hermione said at my house--" He stopped, turning red, and Harry thought he might be remembering their row. He knew that he was. They went back to work.

After class, Ron said to him hurriedly, "Right; I'll write two letters and send them off, one with Hedwig and one with the other owl. I'll tell them to--to send it to Hagrid! That way it will go down to his hut, and Hermione won't spot it. It would look damn suspicious if it came to one of us in the Great Hall during breakfast. She'd be sure to figure it out."

Harry didn't respond as Ron ran down to Hagrid's hut excitedly; he watched him go, wishing he could bury his pride and have their old friendship back. It didn't help that Ron was the one who'd thought of the perfect gift for his girlfriend. Harry swallowed, then turned back toward the castle, shouldering his rucksack. The other sixth year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were emerging from the greenhouse now, and

Hermione caught him up.

"There you are!" she said, smiling brightly and giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. Harry tried to smile back at her, but he had the feeling it hadn't worked very well when she said, "Are you well? You look like you're going to be sick."

He shook his head. "No, I'm fine."

"Where's Ron going?"

"Um--he needs to ask Hagrid something. He'll be along soon."

She nodded, linking her arm in his and putting her head on his shoulder as they walked. She seemed to be oblivious to the rift between him and Ron. "What do you want to do now? We have a couple of hours free before we eat." She gave him a sly smile which he didn't return. He was in a bad mood and wanted to wallow in it; he wasn't appreciating her efforts to cheer him up.

"I need to read for Lupin's class," he said curtly, speeding up, forcing her to quicken her pace and take her head off his shoulder.

"Oh," she said simply, looking a bit deflated.

"But--but I have to go talk to him first. I'll see you in the Great Hall."

"All right," she said, looking disappointed. They'd reached the entrance hall. She kissed him on the cheek again and went up to Gryffindor Tower, while he took the stairs to Lupin's office. But even as he was about to knock, he knew he didn't want to speak to his professor. He was beginning to feel weary of the bad mood; the urge to wallow had passed. Now he wanted to feel light and free, as he hadn't in ages.

Light.

Free.

That was it! He sprinted up the numerous stairs to the Astronomy Tower, which would be deserted at this hour. He raised the trapdoor and stepped out onto the stone flags paving the observation deck, looking to the west, where the sun was getting lower in the pink-tinged sky, and to the east, where he would be going, toward a sky that was already

periwinkle-blue shading down to sapphire. He looked up; the evening star, Venus, already shone brightly in the velvety, cloudless sky.

He smiled and sighed. It was perfect flying weather. He closed his eyes, letting the change course through him, feeling the familiar wrench of his bones changing shape, a pain that had become so familiar he was numb to it now. It was just part of the process. He gazed out over the landscape, preparing to spread his wings--

"Aaah!" He turned, then immediately reverted to his human form, collapsing onto his stomach. He looked up, swallowing.

"Ginny! What are you doing here?"

She stood near the open trapdoor, her mouth hanging open. "I--I--I left my notes up here last night--" she stammered, walking to the west parapet to retrieve the worn leather envelope which bore the stamped initials V.A.W. and the Gryffindor seal. She opened the flap, withdrew a parchment, then nodded and put it back in the envelope. He'd seen her with her notes many times, but he hadn't notice the tanned leather case when he'd arrived on the observation deck.

They looked at each other awkwardly. "Well," Harry said at last. "I--I was going to try to go for a little flight over the forest before dinner. I need to unwind. Stuck in the greenhouse all afternoon." Stuck with your git of a brother, he kept himself from saying.

She nodded. "It's just that--I've never seen you--seen you do that before. I mean--I heard about it. You told all of us; but while Draco and Ron and Hermione have seen you--"

"Right," he said, nodding. "You haven't." He shuffled his feet awkwardly. "Well," he said, breaking the silence. "Here I go."

She nodded, and he executed the change again. He was looking up at her from slightly higher than her waist, his eyes level with her lower ribs, and she advanced toward him uncertainly. When he felt her fingers combing through his mane, and heard her sigh of satisfaction at the softness, he couldn't stop the rumbling purr that always moved through him from growing even louder. As she continued to move her hand he thought he might very well lose his Animagus form from sheer happiness; she rubbed her warm palm down his flinching, muscled back, her fingers trailing onto his flank. She

seemed to have forgotten it was him, Harry Potter, and not an actual golden griffin she was petting.

His hide twitched under her touch, and he backed away from her slightly, trying to maintain his composure, before spreading his wings. The sight of them made her gasp; they absorbed and transformed the rays of the sun, low in the sky as it was, producing rainbow colors on their translucent surfaces.

"Oh, Harry," she breathed, awestruck. He stepped up on the parapet and leapt into the sky, moving his wings slowly as he built height, soon finding himself over the forest. He felt the exultation in his chest, the sensation that he could touch the sky, as he banked and turned, as he soared on a thermal of warm air. There was nothing like it in the world, not even flying on a broomstick, and as he flew, he felt his cares drop away, and nothing mattered now but the beauty of the setting sun and the lights starting to glow in the castle windows, and the delighted expression of Ginny Weasley, watching him return to the tower where she waited for him yet, her face aglow.

He landed lightly and folded his wings against his flanks again, looking up at her. The wonder in her eyes made her look more beautiful than he'd ever seen her, somehow. The setting sun had set her hair afire, and her dark eyes seemed to burn into his. She stepped toward him, smiling uncertainly, stroking his fur again as though rewarding a pet for performing a trick, but he didn't mind; he closed his eyes, relishing her touch, knowing that the moment he reverted to his human form she would back away from him. As long as he remained a griffin, he could have this closeness, and she wouldn't think it odd or awkward....

Oh, dear, he thought, as she continued to pet him just as if he were her cat. I can't take much more of this....

He waited for her to move her hand back up to his mane, a fairly neutral sort of location, before he changed back. He had had his head in her lap as she knelt on the deck, and now he crouched beside her, his human head in her lap, while she continued to run her fingers through his hair. He could feel the warmth of her thigh under his cheek, through her clothes, and each time her fingers combed through his hair, his chest hitched; did she realize what she was doing? He felt like he had goose-pimples all over his scalp, like electric currents were emanating from her fingertips. He turned over, looking

up at her, wrapping his hands around her wrists to stop her from putting her fingers in his hair again. It was too much. He felt like he would go insane if she continued. She looked down at him without any surprise, as though she imagined she was still regarding a griffin. When he slowly released her wrists and he sat up, she reached out and removed his glasses from his face. He held his breath, wondering why she'd done this.

But she simply said, "You're as bad as Percy and my father. How you can see anything when these things are so filthy is beyond me." She took out her wand and touched them briefly, uttering a simple cleaning charm, and returned the glasses to him. He was sitting up now, his legs folded economically. He replaced the glasses on his face, thanking her. The strange moment that had seemed suspended in time, when she'd been running her fingers through his human hair, had passed. Neither one of them commented on it. Instead, they sat close together, not touching, watching the deep blue creep from the eastern horizon, above them, and finally, down the western sky like a blanket being drawn gently over the world.

"Why are you and Ron angry with each other?" she said suddenly, still gazing at the sky. He turned to look at her profile. He hadn't been expecting that. Evidently, unlike Hermione, she wasn't oblivious to the difference in his friendship with Ron. He returned his eyes to the sky again. Somehow, he didn't feel like making up elaborate lies. He would tell her exactly what was what. It would be a relief to talk to someone objective about it.

"He told me I should break up with Hermione," he said simply. That startled her.

"What? He said that?"

"Yes. Because he says we're not in love with each other."

"He said that?" She sounded more hacked off now than Harry was. She crossed her arms, frowning. "Oh, like he knows. I'm sorry, Harry. I had no idea."

"No--it gets even better." He paraphrased for her the reasons why Ron speculated Hermione might have been with Harry to begin with. Her jaw dropped in disbelief.

"He said that?" she said again. "He actually said that?"

"Yes."

She shook her head, looking at the sky. "Well, no wonder you're hacked off at him. I don't blame you a bit."

He drew his mouth into a line. "Well, yes, I do think I'm somewhat justified. For someone I'm pretty sure is in love with Hermione, he had some pretty unflattering things to say about her."

She looked at him, alarmed. "Oh. So you know how he feels about her?"

He grimaced. "Well, I haven't exactly been living in a cave for the last three years, Ginny," he said, feeling slightly insulted.

"I'm sorry, Harry, of course you haven't. I just mean--well--did you think that's how he felt about her when you and Hermione--I mean--when you started sort of seeing each other?"

Harry sighed and looked away. "Yeah. And Hermione said--"
He paused. What had she said.? Ron is an immature git. Don't get me wrong; I love him like a brother....I just cannot believe the way he acted about the Yule Ball, even now. The way he finally asked me--if that could be called asking me. Hermione, you're a girl....How flattering for him to notice....I don't think he's going to have a girlfriend for a long time....He's still such a big baby, and won't say how he feels...

"Hermione thought he probably wouldn't be ready to have a girlfriend for a long time, because of not being able to express his feelings....I--I told him she wouldn't wait forever...."

Ginny shrugged. "Well, he seems to be over that. He was with Parvati."

Right, Harry thought. Parvati. Chosen specifically because she wasn't a good friend, so it was a no-risk relationship. Too bad he couldn't stop thinking of Hermione at a very crucial moment....He cleared his throat. "You do know why Parvati broke up with him?"

Ginny blushed and nodded. "Everyone knows that. I don't know if it's Ron who'll never live it down or poor Parvati. And I'm pretty sure Hermione knows--enough people have laughed about it in the common room--but she seems to want to pretend not to know. I'm not sure what good that does."

He shrugged. "I guess she feels protected by pretending not to know. It means she doesn't have to discuss it."

Ginny nodded, then looked at him sympathetically. "I think you want to forgive Ron. But it would mean swallowing your pride, because--because he said some terrible things, and you don't necessarily want to act like he didn't upset you..."

"That's not all. When he was saying these things, Malfoy--I mean, Draco--was right outside the room, listening. He got an earful. He was especially smug about hearing me telling Ron that from now on your boyfriend was going to be my best friend. Looked like he was having a good laugh about it, he was. I was just hacked off at Ron and--and I had to say something. But it just occurred to me--I don't want people knowing what Ron said. It would kill Hermione, that Ron said those things about her. About her motivations, I mean. Could you--could you ask Mal--er, Draco--not to say anything about what he heard? To anyone?"

She smiled and nodded. "Of course." She watched him with an amused light in her eyes. "You're still getting used to it, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Calling him 'Draco.'"

"Oh. That. I'm not used to doing it here at Hogwarts. I kind of got used to it on the job, during the summer. We thought the other lads would think it strange for us to call each other by our last names. Although I didn't have to actually say his name much, not directly. We were all just 'the lads' during the summer. Sam and Dick--er, Aberforth--and the others didn't expect either one of us to behave in a certain way because of what house we were in or anything. It was just about the work. And I have to admit, for a git who's sat on his bum all his life, he actually was able to work when he put his mind to it. I used to think that knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll was a pretty good way to cement a friendship, but planting trees in Surrey might not be a bad way to do it either."

He grinned at her, remembering the satisfaction of stepping back with 'the lads,' looking at a newly-planted allee of trees--similar to the oaks that used to lead from the castle down to the greenhouses--at an estate near New Stokington. In time, the branches of the London plane trees would meet overhead,

forming a tunnel over the drive leading from the main road to the manor house on the hill, surrounded by the immaculately manicured home park and backed by a tremendous hedge maze and eighteenth-century-style garden. The only thing bad about that job was that Malfoy had thrown Harry's shirt into the middle of the hedge maze--as a prank--while Harry was napping and sunning himself after lunch, and Harry had had to go into the maze to retrieve it. He'd started to get flashbacks to the Triwizard Tournament and had broken out in a cold sweat. Of course, it hadn't helped that he wasn't sleeping at night. His twenty minutes after lunch every day was all the sleep he was getting for almost two months...

He shook himself and looked at her. "Anyway, I may be getting used to calling him 'Draco' sometimes, but I don't really want him to be my best friend. Ron's my best friend. And even though I really don't want anyone to know what Ron said about Hermione, I think the biggest reason why I'm still hacked off at him is--" He hesitated, unsure how to express it.

"What?" she finally said, after waiting for a minute.

He sighed and looked for Venus in the early-evening sky, burning bright and sure. "I'm afraid he might be right."

"What?" she said, meaning it in a different way this time. "Harry, you don't believe that Hermione really only--er, I mean--"

"No, I don't mean he was right about that," he said, feeling a warmth move up his neck to his face. "I mean--well, you and Draco. I've seen--I mean, heard--the two of you say--er, say--"

"What?" It was starting to sound like the only word in her vocabulary.

"I've heard you say 'I love you' to each other," he said in a rush, before he could lose his nerve. "But--Hermione and I never do that. We never have."

She smiled and laughed, touching his arm in what he assumed she thought was a reassuring and friendly gesture. "Oh, Harry, is that all? You really think that means the two of you shouldn't be together? Not everybody--not everybody says it all the time. I think it's pretty clear that you have--that you have a very deep affection for each other. Don't pay attention to Ron. You make--you make a very nice couple," she said

softly, not looking at him. "Ron's just--well, you know how he feels about her--"

Harry nodded. "And it's not as though I can ignore that either. You're right. I did know how he felt about her and I--I went ahead anyway--"

Her hand was still on his arm, and she gave him a friendly squeeze to reassure him. "Harry. Stop fretting about this. You and Hermione are fine. Gracious! You have a lot less to worry about than me and Draco. At least Hermione doesn't have six brothers who'd just as soon eviscerate you as look at you."

He grimaced. "Very vivid, Ginny." And not a bad way to try to get me to stop thinking about you....

She smiled sunnily. "Thank you, thank you."

The dome of blue above them was definitely a night sky now, and not remotely a twilight sky. "We should go down to the Great Hall. After my flight, I could eat a hippogriff," he said, feeling his stomach move within him in a way that had nothing to do with her proximity now and everything to do with not having eaten for five hours. She smiled at him, and then his stomach lurched in the not-food way again. Damn you, Draco Malfoy! he thought. I'm as bad as Ron. I had my chance, and I blew it. Now she's moved on. She thinks Hermione and I make a good couple. We do. We make a good couple. I won't let Ron get to me....

"Flying gives you a good appetite, does it?"

I will not let Ron Weasley get to me, I will not let Ron Weasley get to me....

"Something about the way it feels when the cool air is going through my lungs, I think," he said, trying to carry on a conversation with her and think his new mantra at the same time. "You could have come with me, you know. You could some other time, if you like." He felt his stomach jumping around again. He couldn't believe he'd just dared to say that. Time for a new mantra.

She's Draco Malfoy's girlfriend. Hermione and I make a good couple. She's Draco Malfoy's girlfriend. Hermione and I make a good couple....

"I couldn't have come with you this time, Harry. I don't have

my broom with me. But I could bring it some other time, yes."

"I didn't mean flying with me on a broom." He looked at her, waiting for her to realize. When she did, her eyes opened so wide, he thought it made her look about five years old.

"You mean--"

--as a passenger."

"Oh." She stared at him, then turned her head, biting her lower lip slightly. Harry had to look away from her. She was not making him think of a five-year-old any more. The wind was moving the hair off her shoulders lightly, and he remembered the feeling of her fingers running through his hair again....

"Well, think about it. You might not want to. Hermione hated it. Of course, she hates flying in general--"

"It's not the flying," she said softly, meeting his eyes, then looking away again.

She opened the trap door and started to go down, but turned when he said, "Wait, Ginny." He handed her the leather envelope which held her notes. "You almost forgot this again."

"Oh, right," she said, taking it, looked more than a little flustered now. He followed her down into the castle and they walked down staircase after staircase to the Great Hall without speaking, then sat down next to each other at the Gryffindor table. Both Ron and Hermione looked up when they did. They each looked like they wanted to ask where they'd been. Finally, it was Seamus who did it.

"You two look like you've just come from a tryst in the Astronomy Tower," he said, laughing at their red faces. Seeing their eyes open wide, he dropped his jaw, before saying, "I'm right? You're joking!"

"No!" Harry said immediately, glancing at Ron and Hermione. "I mean--we were just talking. I went up there to--do something else, and Ginny forgot her notes, and--"

Seamus rolled his eyes. "Relax, Harry. Even I know you wouldn't be brainless enough to go after Draco Malfoy's girlfriend, and your best friend's sister, and to risk the smartest witch in the school hexing you," he added, glancing furtively at Hermione. Harry smiled feebly. He tried not to look

at Ginny; he rather got the impression she was blushing furiously. He could feel the heat emanating from her.

"My reputation for brilliance precedes me, obviously," he said wryly.

They had a good laugh at that, including Harry (and even Ron, he noted). I can do this, Harry thought. I can be with Ginny and just think of her as a friend. (Although it would help if Seamus didn't make jokes about trysts in the Astronomy Tower.) He looked at Hermione. Ginny's right; Hermione and I work well together. He tried to give her a feeble smile across the table, but Hermione didn't take notice of this; she seemed to be looking at Ginny strangely during the remainder of the evening meal....

"Harry!"

His eyes flew open. Remus Lupin was striding across the infirmary, looking concerned. Harry sat up. It was so good to see him again! Even though he knew, realistically, that he had seen him the day before for class (he didn't remember the class, but he remembered his timetable now), he felt like he hadn't seen him since he and Jamie had watched the Longbottoms drag him off to the werewolf camp. *Jamie.* Lupin didn't know Jamie and never would. He thought of what a good honorary-uncle he'd been, bouncing him and Jamie on his knee when they were wee (he winced--*I have to stop doing that*), reading them bedtime stories when he babysat them, wrestling on the drawing room rug with the twins and pretending they had overwhelmed him, groaning melodramatically....and then mysteriously disappearing several nights a month, until he moved in with them because he couldn't hold down a job in the wizarding world. Sirius would come and stay at Hog's End too, during the full moon, keeping his friend company when he was in his wolf form, although Lupin was actually quite docile at these times owing to his parents' expertise in brewing the Wolfsbane Potion. Harry remembered one time when he was allowed to stroke the wolf's soft fur; the red eyes were disconcerting, but they were still somehow Remus' eyes, and he knew that the potion would prevent him from being harmed. Sirius had slept by his side in dog form. Was that when Sirius and his mother started carrying on? Harry wondered. After Remus Lupin moved in with us and before the Aurors came to get him?

He shook himself. I have to remember things from *this* life. That's the immediate problem. I can think about processing my memories of my other life later....

He smiled up at his teacher. Lupin patted his shoulder. "I saw you go off with the headmaster after breakfast, and I have a free period right now, so rather than skulk about the staff room, I thought I'd ask him why he was talking to you. He told me you were down here, and could probably

use some company. What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry grimaced, not knowing whether Dumbledore wanted the entire world to know what he'd done with the timelines. "I--I'm having trouble remembering things. Things about the last eight months. But Madam Pomfrey gave me some potion, and it feels like it's starting to work. I've already remembered something from way back in September..."

"I see. Why do you think this happened? A curse? A hex? And if so, from whom?"

Harry hesitated. "No, it's not a curse or a hex. I think--I think it has to do with the insomnia I had last summer." That was partially true. He was certain that his judgment wouldn't have been impaired and he wouldn't have done the spell with Voldemort if he'd been sleeping.

"Hmmm," Lupin said thoughtfully, his chin in his hand, as he sat in a chair at Harry's bedside.

"And last night I remembered something from later in September, and Christmas day..."

"Last night? How long have you been feeling this way?"

Harry sighed. "That's not important. I--I talked to Dumbledore about Snape, as well. About what to do about it."

Lupin grimaced. "Sirius and Arabella and the other operatives have been chasing Peter around Great Britain for the last eight months, Harry. What makes you think you can do any better?"

"I told Professor Dumbledore that we should contact Wormtail and offer to trade me for Snape. Except it wouldn't be a trade, not really. It would be an ambush."

His professor was struck speechless momentarily, his mouth hanging open. "What? Are you mad, Harry? Are you sure it's just your memory giving you trouble?" The werewolf looked like he might very well cart him off to St. Mungo's any minute.

"Yes, I'm sure. He's--he's started--started--" He swallowed; he couldn't bear to think of it. From when he was six, he remembered his stepfather running his long, thin fingers wonderingly through his wife's dark red hair as she sat at her dressing table, brushing the tresses that went past her waist....

He shook himself again. "He's started cutting off fingers, Professor," he said, hardening his voice. Lupin's look of horror touched Harry; clearly all

of the adolescent animosity toward Severus Snape was purely in the past. He remembered Snape being at Lupin's flat in Manchester the previous Christmas, before he went to the Death Eater's meeting where Draco Malfoy was initiated. Sirius had joked about Snape putting up with socializing with the two former Gryffindors, now his fellow operatives, but Harry imagined it had to be better than spending Christmas alone. Although, perhaps, he might have gone to see his uncle in Dunoon for the holiday....

"Professor MacDermid!" Harry said suddenly, sitting up. "What time is it?"

Lupin checked his watch. "The second bell for the second period is about to--"

Rrrrrriiiinnnnnggggg!

--ring," he finished lamely, after the noise from the bell had died down.

Harry realized he must have been oblivious to the first bell while he was thinking about being with Ginny at the top of the Astronomy Tower. He scrambled out of the bed, crouching down to find his shoes under it, swearing softly and then thinking, *I will not adopt Draco Malfoy's bad habits. I will not adopt Draco Malfoy's bad habits...* But then he said, "Bugger! I mean--brilliant; I'm going to be late again--"

"Harry, you're in no condition to go to class! Get back in bed!"

Harry started pulling on his shoes and tying the laces quickly. "I'm fine. I told you the potion's helping. It will be easier for me to remember things if I'm going through my usual routine instead of lying in bed. Honestly, *I'm fine.*" He sprang to his feet, heading for the door of the infirmary, but then he realized he still had a problem and he turned on his heel, going back to Lupin, who was standing with his arms crossed, a bemused expression on his face. "Professor, I, ah, I could use--"

Lupin reached into his pocket, and amidst red and blue sparks, he took out a small piece of parchment, which already had on it a note for Professor MacDermid excusing Harry for his lateness. He handed it to Harry with a smile, not saying a word. Harry looked at it in amazement.

"Are you sure you shouldn't be teaching Divination? You couldn't be worse than Trelawney."

Lupin laughed, and Harry couldn't help but laugh too; it was infectious. He liked it when Professor Lupin laughed. He so rarely looked anything other than pensive. "I suppose you *are* feeling better, Harry, to be making jokes about teachers," he said, trying to sound like he was chiding him, but his eyes were still merry.

Harry left, looking over his shoulder at him again for a moment, remembering the thin, defeated-looking man who had been removed from Hog's End and placed in the purple Ministry carriage, to spend years locked up in a werewolf detention camp in the mountains...

He felt satisfied as he walked down the stairs to the dungeons. *Remus Lupin would still be in a camp if I hadn't fixed the timelines.* He decided to feel good about this, as it was easier than trying to feel good about not having his mother and sister and little brothers....

"Ah, Mr. Potter!" Snape's uncle said as soon as Harry opened the dungeon door and entered. "How good of ye te condescend to join oos!" Harry winced as he walked forward, holding the parchment out to him as though it might explode. Professor MacDermid took it and glanced at it quickly, crumpling it in his hand. Harry shivered under his gaze. He had remembered Uncle Duncan as a far less stern man. But this man was *not* his "Uncle Duncan." He did not consider Harry to be a member of his family. "Take yer place!" he ordered Harry curtly, clearly looking put-out at not being able to take away house points, since Harry was excused for his tardiness.

He turned and glanced at the other students; the girls had all fixed their eyes on their handsome professor--despite his sternness--with dreamy expressions on their faces. Harry saw now the resemblance to a famous Scottish actor, and he took his place next to Pansy without her noticing. He rolled his eyes. At least he wasn't wearing a kilt, he thought, remembering Hermione's reaction to Snape at the ceilidh. He might very well make all of them *faint*.

How he got through the class he never knew, since Pansy was in another world, and he felt like Neville's toad could probably outdo him on a potions test, his mind was so addled. The potion was making him remember more things, but now the events were scattered and out of order, confusing in the way they tumbled into his head hither-thither. He tried to clear his head, remember Hermione's birthday....

Hermione was sitting in one of the armchairs near the fire in the common room. Harry and Ron had just walked down the stairs from the boys' dorms, carrying her gift between them. She'd already opened her presents from Ginny and Neville. Her eyes opened wide as they set the brown-paper-wrapped object before her on the floor; they could tell from her face that she knew exactly what it was.

Before she had even opened it, she was throwing her arms around each of them in turn, kissing Ron on the cheek and kissing Harry for slightly longer on the mouth. Then she dove at it, tearing off the paper. She laid it down flat and fumbled

at the catches, opening the case, then began to move her hands gently, wonderingly, over the cinnamon-colored cello lying in the green felt-lined case. She removed the bow from its place and found the new rosin that was secreted in its own little niche. She rosined the bow and began to tune the cello, her face glowing the entire time.

When she felt satisfied with the tuning, she played a scale, going up and down, then repeating it, over and over, until finally, Ron said, "You don't just have to play scales, you know. We have some new music for you, too."

She looked up, swallowing. "Really?" Ron drew a large envelope out of his rucksack and presented it to her. She opened it, her smile growing even larger as she raised her eyes to Harry's. "Bach. Unaccompanied cello suites. You remembered I was playing Bach at the ceilidh."

Harry tried to maintain his smile; he hadn't remembered, actually. It was Ron's idea; when he'd written to Hermione's parents, asking them to send her cello, he wanted to know whether they could think of any specific music she might want. When he had their answer, he'd written to Bill and Bill had bought it for him in London. Technically speaking, it wasn't from Harry; he hadn't even known about it, and he tried to hide it now. She pulled Harry's mouth down to hers, parting her lips slightly for a moment, then whispering in his ear, "I'll thank you properly later," with a sly look that was impossible to misinterpret. Harry looked at Ron, who was looking very pleased with himself. Harry again felt like hitting him.

She spread out the music on a footstool and started to [play](#); Harry tried to forget being upset with Ron and just listened. Her face was amazing to watch; she seemed to go through all of the emotions a human being was capable of experiencing while she played, all very clear on her face, and Harry had the thought that he had never seen her happier since he had known her. In the throes of physical passion, yes, purely happy, no. Not quite like this. Having her cello seemed to complete her in a way that nothing else did. Harry felt his resentment of Ron surface again. He never should have agreed to this, he thought. He should have thought of his own present. He remembered the lion bookends he'd given her the previous Christmas and frowned. If he had bought something himself, he probably would have been upstaged by the cello. He grimaced as he realized that nothing he could have thought of would probably outdo this.

He pretended to feel ill afterward and said he was going to the hospital wing. Hermione wanted to come with him, but he said she should stay in the common room and enjoy her birthday presents. She didn't need a lot of convincing. When he left, Ron was sitting on the floor near her chair, his heart showing plainly on his face; he watched her pleasure as she played, the cello cradled between her legs, and Harry thought he saw her left hand behaving strangely on the strings....He caught Ginny's eye as he left; she was sending a small, pitying smile his way, which was something he did not want to encourage. He was fine; he didn't need pity.

Harry didn't go to the hospital wing, but up to the Astronomy Tower again, taking a short flight over the forest before dinner. Afterward, Hermione didn't come back up to Gryffindor Tower, but it didn't occur to him to wonder where she was; he was simply relieved he didn't have to face her "gratitude" for the present that was Ron's idea.

He managed to avoid her every day after classes were over, and she failed to come to the common room each night after dinner, so he was caught somewhat unawares when she grabbed him by the robes as he was coming out of the portrait hole Saturday afternoon following her birthday, and he had no good excuse when she suggested they go up to Fluffy's old lair....

Harry hesitated for many reasons: they hadn't been up there since the day he'd learned of Dudley's death; she wanted to "thank" him for the birthday present, which hadn't been his idea; and he was still thinking about the things Ron had said about why she was with him. He was determined to come up with a way to get out of this, but as soon as they were in the room alone, lit only by a few candles Hermione had conjured right after they'd entered, she started doing things that drove all thoughts of escape out of his mind....

He lay on the magically cushioned floor afterward, Hermione's head pillowed on his chest while she made little contented noises, snuggling closer against him. Harry's head ached; he felt he'd been unforgivably weak. He should have found a way to avoid being in this situation, but when she had started unbuttoning his shirt while kissing his neck, then moving her hands down his body....

I'm a terrible person, he thought. A voice at the back of his brain answered, For shagging your own girlfriend? When she

wanted it? That's terrible why?

Because I should be able to tell her I love her.

Only if it's true, the voice responded. Harry grimaced. It was a good point. To say such a thing and not mean it--that was worse than not saying it at all.

But I mean it, he thought. Don't I? I love her. Yes. Of course I do. This is silly. I shouldn't let Ron mess with my mind. I'll do it. I'll say it.

Silence. Minutes passed.

Here I go, he thought. I'm going to say it.

Silence.

He wasn't sure how much time had gone by when Hermione sat up, saying, "We should probably get dressed and go down to dinner." He drew in his breath, looking at her. Damn. It was so hard not to stare; she was so beautiful, and her continued routine of running in the mornings meant she was in fabulous physical condition now, even more so than when she'd begun the runs with him and Dudley in Surrey. She hadn't a stitch on and looked flawless from head to foot. His breath hitched. Was it any wonder he hadn't pushed her away?

"I, er, um--yeah. We should go downstairs..."

She looked down at his body, smiling slyly. "Sorry. Am I making it difficult for you to want to go?" She had a look of power about her. Harry wished men could better hide when they were sexually stimulated.

"Actually, I am pretty hungry..." He tried to think of other things. Food. That would be good. Think of food. Leg of lamb. He looked at her legs. Okay, bad example, he thought. Melons. Stop! his brain shouted. Really bad example....

He forced himself to stand and started gathering up his clothes. Professor Trelawney. There. That was helping. He continued thinking of the Divination professor, finding that it was very, very effective as a way to shake off the stimulation he had started to feel again. He dressed without looking at her, hearing her moving around, also dressing. Apparently she wasn't put out by his not wanting another go-round. He felt ashamed enough as it was.

Just say it.

As they moved toward the door, preparing to leave, he looked down at her; she was flushed with her fulfillment, her curls beautifully askew on her head, and he gathered her into his arms, kissing her again, feeling her body mold itself to his, her arms binding him to her. When he broke the kiss, looking down at her, he took a deep breath and said, "Hermione."

She looked up at him expectantly. He continued to look at her, his mouth working soundlessly. She laughed after a minute.

"Yes? You had something to say?"

He took a deep breath again. "Hermione, I--I--" He felt like his heart was going so quickly it would leap from his ribcage.

Just say it.

"*Hermione, I--I lo--*" He stopped.

I should be able to tell her I love her.

Only if it's true.

His mouth worked some more, but nothing came out. She smiled up at him.

"*Harry, if we don't go soon, dinner will be over and we'll have to go down to the kitchens for food.*"

He closed his mouth again and nodded. "Right. We should go." Before he lost his resolve again and ripped off her clothes again, and his....

He looked furtively at where Hermione was working with Draco Malfoy. Malfoy seemed to be taking every opportunity to either look down the front of her robes or drop things on the floor so he could peek at her legs while scrambling around to pick up whatever he had dropped. *I wish Ginny could see him at this, he thought. Maybe then she wouldn't think so highly of him.* Then he noticed Ron, who had a look of absolute hatred on his face as he ground asphodel root into a fine powder with his mortar and pestle, working next to Millicent Bulstrode. Harry thought the hatred was directed at him at first, which struck him as odd, since he knew that they were getting along better. Then he realized that it was directed at Malfoy; Ron had also noticed the trouble Malfoy was taking to ogle Hermione, and was clearly incensed.

Harry was jolted. *Oh, he thought. I'm supposed to be upset that he's looking at my girlfriend that way, instead of thinking that Ginny should see him so she'd know what he really is...*

He sighed, going back to work, trying to break Pansy's stare as she gazed dreamily at Professor MacDermid, who was sitting at his lectern on a high stool, poring over his notes for other classes. He put an elbow in her ribs and hissed her name. She shot him a look of death. Harry glanced again at the stern sixtyish man with the salt-and-pepper hair and beard, looking through his reading glasses and frowning, rather than slapping Harry on the back and offering to take him sailing on the Firth of Clyde, as the whole family had done during the summer when Harry was thirteen in his other life....

He sighed. *I miss Snape.*

* * * * *

As they were eating lunch, Harry whispered to Ron out of the corner of his mouth, *"I need to talk to you and Hermione and Ginny and Malfoy before we go to afternoon classes."*

Ron looked startled. "What about?" he said softly.

Harry looked around to see whether anyone was listening. "Snape," he said quickly, his mouth barely moving. Ron nodded.

"Where?"

Harry thought. That was a good question. The anteroom? They'd be seen, the five of them, trooping in there. The library? Too public.

Just then, Nearly Headless Nick floated the length of the table, affording Harry a conspiratorial nod and a small smile as he passed, and then it came to him.

"*Myrtle's bathroom.*"

Ron grimaced and whispered, "Isn't there the risk we'll see *Myrtle* if we do that?"

Harry shrugged. "She may be interested, actually. Remember--technically, she's on our side. Tom Riddle killed her," he said softly. Ron nodded.

"All right, then. I'll tell Ginny, and she can get the Slytherins to come."

"Slytherins?" Harry said, quickly lowering his voice again after his initial surprise. "Why would we include the Slytherins?"

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Are you daft, Harry? I don't mean all of them. Just Malfoy and Mariah."

Then Harry remembered; Mariah Kirkner had been in on most of the private meetings they'd had during the year to discuss Snape's situation and, sometimes, Malfoy's abuse at the hands of the other Slytherins. His treatment had been their main concern at times, as he had experienced some rather extreme harrassment. He'd been in the hospital wing more than once, Ginny sitting by his side, while Madam Pomfrey removed boils from his face, or held a pan in front of him for him to retch into. Malfoy had *not* been having a happy, carefree sixth year, and, Harry reflected, ogling Hermione in Potions was probably some of the only fun he had, aside from the times he was able to be alone with Ginny. Somehow, he no longer felt resentful of the way Malfoy had been behaving in Potions. Hell, he thought, she's my girlfriend, and sometimes *I* can't prevent myself from ogling her....

And then there was Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner.

He thought about the two of them being in the Trophy Room late at night in September. *It was probably perfectly innocent*, he thought. He'd probably learned of yet another plot the other Slytherins had concocted to make his life hell, or she'd learned of it. Harry wondered how he'd cope if his own housemates turned on him and if they were Slytherins, capable both of great resentment and very devious pranks.

Wait, he thought. *I've been a Slytherin now....*

Well, he considered, maybe I can think of what *I'd* do and help him prepare to meet the next challenge they might dish out....

The six of them left the Great Hall when they were done eating, Ginny having crept over to the Slytherin table and whispered the plan to Draco, who in turn leaned close to Mariah, beside him, and spoke softly in her ear. Harry recalled the look of ownership the Mariah in his other life had given Draco when they arrived at the castle and he helped her out of the horseless carriage....The question was, how did he feel about *her*?

Harry glanced at Ginny as they all climbed the stairs.

If he hurts you, he thought, he'll have to answer to me.

They reached Myrtle's bathroom and, before entering, looked around in case Filch or any prefects (other than Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Mariah and Draco Malfoy) were in the area. Harry still remembered Percy scolding him and Ron for being in a girls' bathroom. Because of Myrtle's persistent messing around with the plumbing, the facility was no more suited to

regular use than it had been in Harry's second year, and the sign reading "Out of Order" that hung on the door was old and faded, with a few dried water splotches on it.

They entered and Hermione put a locking charm on the door. The five others stood looking at Harry expectantly, since he was the one to call them together. He cleared his throat and said, "Listen. I've thought a lot about this, and it seems to me this has gone on long enough. Snape's been tortured for months on end now, whenever Wormtail's not trying to keep one step ahead of the operatives, although luckily, that's a lot of the time. But they're all tired, and Snape hasn't given anything up. Wormtail's getting desperate now. He's started--" He hesitated again. Clearing his throat once more, he forged on. "Dumbledore received a letter with the most recent update on what Wormtail's doing to Snape. It also included--a finger."

Hermione, Ginny and Mariah covered their mouths in horror. Ron's eyes were very wide, and Malfoy looked struck dumb. Mariah was the first one to recover.

She lifted her chin and said, "He's my haid o'hoose. I'll do whataiver ye want, Harry."

He nodded at her. "I don't think any of you are going to think I'm sane, but here it is: I've told Dumbledore I want him to send a letter to Wormtail offering him a trade. Me for Snape."

"Harry, no!" was the first response. It came from Ginny. He looked at her, his heart turning over, remembering in his other life saying goodbye to her in the caretaker's office....

Hermione looked angry. "There's got to be a better way than that, Harry. You can't just hand yourself over to Wormtail. He'll either kill you or give you to You-Know-Who, and *he'll* kill you."

Ron looked equally angry. "Are you just giving up, Harry?"

"As reluctant as I always am to agree with Weasley or Granger," Malfoy drawled, glancing briefly at each of them, "I have to anyway. Are you *mad*?"

Harry looked around at the five of them; when he met Ginny's eyes she looked back at him in anguish, but then he began to see that she was thinking; her eyes had narrowed slightly. Slowly she said, "That's not all, is it Harry? There's more, isn't there? I think we need to listen to everything he has to say."

Harry outlined his idea for the ambush, explaining about the forest and

the Muggle-repelling charms forming a kind of border between the wizarding and Muggle parts of it. "I think that's one reason it's called 'The Forbidden Forest' on our end. There aren't any wizard-repelling charms along the border, keeping students from crossing over and going through to the Muggle world. If students knew it was so easy to get to a Muggle village, there could be chaos. Well--that and it wouldn't *really* be all that easy to get through the forest. It's not even well-known by most wizards where the school is geographically. It doesn't help that it's not plottable, of course, but most don't need to know, since they usually just go through Hogsmeade. But we can tip Wormtail off to this and that way he can get into the forest without having to go through Hogsmeade, and we can arrange a place to meet him in there. We'll have all the advantages; we'll be making the rules."

Mariah looked doubtful. "This Wormtail....He's a rat Animagus, ent he? Draco said he was. Those of us who can become animals, who can *think* like animals....we're not like other folk. He can go on ahaid, inta the forest, and find us oot. He'll knoo it's an ambush. There's no way he won't knoo."

Hermione frowned at her. "Those of *us* who can become animals?"

Mariah looked flustered. "I mean--us witches and wizards. Those magical folk who can do the Animagus Transfiguration." Hermione narrowed her eyes. She looked down at Mariah's hands; the Slytherin girl was wearing black leather fingerless gloves, even though it was May.

"Are you cold, Mariah?" Hermione nodded at her gloves, and Mariah hastily put her hands behind her.

"No, I--I just like to wear them for protection in--in Care of Magical Creatures."

"Anyway," Ron said with a sigh, "Mariah's right, Harry. Wormtail isn't stupid. All those years he lived with my family, and we had no idea. He's not just going to take your word for it--he's going to check out the forest first. You can count on it."

"I *am* counting on it. That's why everyone won't be in the forest at the start. But you'll all be *poised* to come. Plus, the Elven Army will be a big part of it; they can be wherever they need to be in a split second, since what they can do is as good as Apparating. And the giants are already there. Granted, he knows about the giants, but we can practice putting camouflage spells on them, so he might not notice them waiting. They can be very still, you know. That's how giants get on in many parts of the world now--" suddenly, Harry had a memory of having a conversation to this effect with Hagrid's mum, sometime in November, but he would have to think about that later "--and the first time we saw Hagrid's mum--" he

indicated himself, Ron and Hermione "--we thought her legs were tree trunks. The Dueling Club will be the last wave, officially, although we'll have someone on hand to summon the teachers, if necessary.

Dumbledore will already be there, of course. That's how we aim to convince Wormtail to make sure he brings Snape. I think he's pretty scared of Dumbledore, as he should be, of course."

They all looked thoughtful. Then Hermione spoke up. "Polyjuice Potion."

"What?" Harry frowned, wondering if she was bringing it up because in their second year they'd made the potion in the very bathroom in which they were standing. "What if Wormtail gives someone else Polyjuice Potion so they look like Snape--or him? It could be any old person, wizard or Muggle, and we wouldn't know until afterward."

Harry thought. After a few minutes, he said, "We tell him that we are just going to sit all together and wait for an hour. That's how long the potion lasts. That way we'll know he's really him and Snape's really Snape, and he'll also know that I'm really me and not someone else who's taken Polyjuice Potion to look like me. We'll make it look like we're insisting on this so that *he*'ll know we're being straight with him. If he doesn't really get me, he's got a lot to lose. What if *Dumbledore* disguised himself as me and went back with Wormtail? He'd be in big trouble then."

Malfoy looked as though this were painfully obvious. "Well, *yeah*. Of course he would be. So why don't we do *that* instead?"

"Two reasons: First, it takes weeks to brew Polyjuice Potion, and I want to do this as soon as possible. Second, because *he* could suggest the one-hour-waiting period to avoid exactly this kind of thing happening, and then we'd be out of luck. And I don't want to risk Wormtail getting killed; the second most important thing in this entire operation is getting Wormtail alive and healthy to the Ministry and a trial, so he can own up to--" he glanced at Mariah, unable to remember on the spur of the moment whether she knew about Sirius "--to other things he's done in the past. It's very important to get Snape back, but it's also very important to just plain get *Wormtail*."

They all nodded, but then the bell rang for the end of lunch, and they immediately scrambled out of the bathroom, except for Harry. Myrtle hadn't shown her face, and he wanted to talk to her.

Feeling a bit ridiculous, he stood near the sinks calling, "Myrtle! Oi, Myrtle!" He tried going into her favorite stall--the one where she'd died--and rather self-consciously leaned over and called into the toilet bowl for her. When that failed, he tried calling into the sinks (except for the one that he knew led to the Chamber of Secrets). Nothing. No slightly plump, would-be-pimply-if-she-had-skin, depressed and depressing ghost of a

teenage girl. He started to leave, when he heard a *whooshing!* noise in one of the stalls, and a great splash of water which spilled out onto the floor near the sinks.

"Myrtle?" he said softly. She floated through the stall door, looking rather miffed.

"Oh. It's you," she said, turning away, looking rather like speaking to him would be quite beneath her.

"Um, Myrtle, I was just wondering--why didn't you ever tell me to fix the timelines when I was in my other life? Why didn't I see you at all?"

She turned around and raised one ghostly eyebrow. "What makes you think *I* didn't see *you*?"

He frowned. "Where?"

"You *did* have a habit of showering in the Quidditch changing rooms every morning, and they *are* a part of the Hogwarts plumbing system..."

He flushed, remembering when he had been certain she was spying on him in the prefects' bathroom. "I see. But you never talked to me. You never told me to change things back, like the other ghosts."

She shrugged. "Why should I have? In the world you created--everyone else was as miserable as me. It was wonderful! Do you know I actually had a little crowd of girls who used to meet in here with me and commiserate that I wouldn't have been allowed to go to the school after the ban on Muggle-born students? And the things I was able to tell them about Tom Riddle..." She clucked her tongue. Harry was amazed. She'd *liked* the other world. She'd been in her element, at the center of a group for the first time in her life. *Er, afterlife*, he thought.

She glared at him now. He swallowed; she did not look like a happy ghost. She was once again relegated to haunting an out-of-order girls' bathroom with no group of teenage girls hanging on her every word. *I guess not everyone is glad I restored the timeline.* He backed toward the door.

"Well," he said, his voice shaking, "it was good to see you...."

He bolted from the room and was almost immediately pulled by Hermione into a side corridor leading to some empty classrooms, looking like she had something urgent to say to him and Ron, who was already with her.

"There you are, Harry. Listen--did you see how Mariah reacted to my asking her about her gloves?" Hermione demanded. Harry frowned at her. This he was not expecting. Ron looked impatient.

"So?"

"So? So, this morning, she was wearing those gloves when she was running. And she said they were for Care of Magical Creatures, which I'm pretty sure the fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins don't have today. And she started to come with me and Ginny and Annika to the girls' prefects' bathroom, then while she was getting undressed to shower, she suddenly changed her mind and ran out, said she was going to use the Slytherin showers because she'd forgotten something in her dorm. She's done that before."

Harry frowned now. "I didn't know that."

Hermione looked triumphant. Ron huffed, still impatient. "What does any of this *mean*? So she has a thing about her gloves. You don't think that means she's not with us, do you?"

Hermione furrowed her brow, thinking hard but also looking frustrated. "There's something fishy about her and those gloves. She was down--" Suddenly, she stopped and looked around furtively. When she spoke again, she had dropped her voice considerably. "She was down to her bra and knickers and socks, and she *still* had those gloves on. Then she took off a sock, looked like she'd been bitten by something, put it back on, got dressed again, and then after telling that fib about needing something in her dorm, she practically bolted out of there."

Even Ron looked puzzled by this, failing to suggest a possible explanation for the bizarre behavior Hermione had just described. Harry considered why a person might do such a thing. "Maybe she had a wart on her toe that hadn't gone away, and she didn't want to take off her socks and show it. Or maybe she has warts on her hands."

Hermione shook her head. "It's easy for Madam Pomfrey to treat anyone who gets warts. Look how often Neville goes to her, for the warts he gets from Trevor."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe it's some other kind of skin condition, something Madam Pomfrey can't treat."

Then something occurred to Harry. "She doesn't wear the gloves all the time, but every so often, when she does, she *is* kind of obsessive about it...."

"I know!" Hermione said more loudly. "And then, in Myrtle's bathroom, she sounded so strange when she said *Those of us who can become animals....*"

Ron suddenly looked alarmed, and Harry thought he knew why. "Are you afraid she knows I'm an Animagus, Hermione? Because Malfoy may have told her."

She looked startled, as though that *hadn't* been her thought at all. "Um--er, of course. It sounded so strange. Like--like she was suggesting someone in the *room* could do it....You're probably right. Malfoy must have told her."

Harry frowned at her; her voice sounded very, very odd. Ron's face looked strange too; his gaze went back and forth between his two best friends as though he expected one of them to burst into flames, or into song, or something, any moment.

"We need to get moving," Ron said, sounding strangled. "The second bell's going to ring."

Harry led the other two as they dashed through the corridors, letting his feet take the route they wanted, but not noticing *where* he was going, precisely, and when he found himself at the door to the History of Magic classroom just as the bell rang, he stopped short.

Binns.

How could he face Binns? Not only did Binns kill his sister and Ginny in his other life, and torture his brother, he would *remember* the other world. Harry's heart was thudding very, very loudly, and he simply could *not* bring himself to cross the threshold of the classroom. He'd completely forgotten the conversation about Mariah Kirkner.

Ron and Hermione plowed into him. "Go on, then!" Ron said impatiently, pushing Harry into the room. Harry stumbled in, catching himself quickly so he wouldn't fall on his face. He frowned at Ron. Hermione still looked concerned about Mariah. "Hurry up, Harry. Sit down."

He slid into his seat, remembering how he had actually fallen asleep during his History of Magic O.W.L. the previous year. He'd always thought Binns was boring but benign. After knowing the living Binns in his other life, he could never think of him any other way....

The History of Magic professor came floating through the chalkboard and immediately turned around and started writing the day's notes on the board with his ghostly finger. As usual, the letters glowed with an eerie phosphorescence. Harry's quill was poised over his parchment, but he couldn't begin writing. The ghostly professor turned around and began to drone, "During the Transylvanian vampire purges of 1541--" But then he stopped, staring at Harry, who was glaring back at him, never having felt more full of hatred, and simultaneously feeling like he wanted to cry for

days. He put his quill to his parchment, finally writing. He was sitting in the first row of desks, and when he held up what he'd written, none of the other students were in a position to see it.

I KNOW.

The grey face looked, if possible, even greyer, and his mouth worked without producing any words. Finally, he closed his mouth and tried to look dignified.

"Mr. Potter, please. I need to speak to you in the corridor."

Harry rose from his desk and followed his teacher, opening the door for himself since the ghost had already passed through it. When they were in the corridor, Harry looked at his professor with his arms crossed over his chest, wishing Binns wasn't already dead so he could kill him.

The ghost raised his face to Harry's, and Harry could see immediately that Binns was sorry, that he wished he hadn't done what he'd done in that other life, that he had never wanted to be a murderer. Harry swallowed, feeling some of his anger leave him. He should give Binns the chance to explain....

"What happened?" he asked tersely.

Binns heaved a ghostly sigh, sitting in mid-air to begin the tale. "First, I want you to know how sorry I am, Harry. Truly. I was in Ravenclaw in school, and I felt very close to the students in that house. For a while I was head of Ravenclaw. Not long before--before the You-Know-Who fell, two former students came to see me here at the school. They'd been in Ravenclaw when I was head of house. They had become Death Eaters and were trying to recruit me. I panicked. I didn't know what to do.

"Then You-Know-Who fell and I was relieved that I didn't need to worry about being recruited any more. However, the Ministry was aware that my former students were Death Eaters and were pursuing them--as they were many of You-Know-Who's followers, after his fall. They came to me for sanctuary. I didn't want anyone to think I might be a Death Eater too, and I turned them in to the Ministry, but before they were apprehended--right here in the castle, in my own study, which is where I told the Ministry they could be found--they put poison into my teapot, and when I sat down to have a nice cuppa by the fire that evening, thinking I'd done the right thing and was well rid of them--I died.

"And yet--I also felt there was so much to do, still. So many young minds to teach. Death did not stand in my way; I continued teaching them and have been doing so ever since. I never told anyone that I'd been murdered. I taunted Peeves--on purpose--and he broke the teapot and

my favorite cup and saucer, destroying the evidence of the poisoning. My murderers tried to escape from the Ministry and were killed by Aurors. There didn't seem to be a point for anyone to know I was murdered....

"However--in the world in which You-Know-Who did *not* fall, I still had to answer yes or no to the recruitment, after the night your father died. I felt trapped and I reluctantly agreed to become a Death Eater. I was punished repeatedly for not following orders, suffering Cruciatus so many times I thought I would lose my mind....Finally, You-Know-Who decided that it would be easiest to get me to comply by putting me under Imperius. And so he did; I was under Imperius for the last twelve years of my life, watching myself do horrible, despicable things--" his eyes looked imploringly at Harry "--like--like killing your sister and Ginny Weasley and torturing your brother--until, finally, the headmaster stopped me by putting me out of my misery."

Harry stared back at the ghost, the remnant of the man who had been a vessel for Voldemort, who hadn't the strength of mind to resist Imperius (which put him in good company, as many others had had the same problem). Harry swallowed, remembering getting the letter in Azkaban, finding out that Jamie was dead, and Ginny, and that Simon was in St. Mungo's....

"When I found out what you'd done--I escaped from Azkaban. It--it woke me up," he said softly. "I knew then--I knew I couldn't wait any longer. That I had to fix the timelines...." Suddenly, Harry found himself in the unexpected role of someone trying to alleviate the guilt of the one who had murdered his sister and the woman he loved....

Binns shook his head. "That still doesn't excuse what I did..." Harry bit his lip; he didn't know what to say. It had never occurred to him to wonder what kind of anguish people might have gone through who were among those doing things under Imperius, things they hated doing, would never have done otherwise. Did they think, *I'm sorry!* at people they were killing, even while they were doing it? Did they feel like killing themselves afterward? None of it would have happened if he hadn't changed the timelines. In a way, anything and everything that happened in that other world was all his fault. Before the previous September, this guilt wasn't something Binns was going to have to carry around for an eternity.

"Why don't we go back?" Harry said to him softly, feeling sorry for the ghost, who would never know peace, who now, in addition to teaching History of Magic forever would be forced to remember the other world Harry had created, and the dreadful things he'd been forced to do in that world....

Ron and Hermione looked at him strangely when he and the professor returned to the classroom. He didn't say anything to them. They looked

like they wanted to ask him what that was all about when they were on their way to Herbology, but Harry walked briskly through the corridors, his rucksack slung over his shoulder, to show that he wasn't interested in idle chit-chat.

* * * *

He tried talk to Professor Dumbledore after classes, but the headmaster said he was still considering Harry's proposal and had to speak to some other people before coming to a decision. Harry was feeling itchy and impatient; he was tempted to fire off a letter to Wormtail himself, but he knew he didn't dare initiate an operation of this magnitude without Dumbledore's stamp of approval.

He went to the common room after seeing Dumbledore, since they were going to be celebrating Ron's seventeenth birthday. He was finally of-age. He could do magic out of school without anyone at the Ministry batting an eye about it. And he could vote for the Minister of Magic. Harry swallowed. Maybe after he turned seventeen, in July, Dumbledore would let him leave the Dursleys once and for all, since after that he would be able to protect himself without getting into trouble with the Ministry.

He found his feet going on auto-pilot to his dorm, and then he remembered: he'd bought a new set of Quidditch balls for Ron. He took the case out of his trunk. He'd had the leather case embossed with Ron's initials: R.A.W. for Ronald Arthur Weasley. Hmm, Harry thought. Sometimes his initials were a pretty apt description of Ron.

When he arrived in the common room with his present, Ron was just coming in the portrait hole with Hermione, who was leading him with a blindfold on. Harry frowned.

"Um, Hermione--I have a feeling Ron knows where he is."

"That's not the reason for the blindfold." Harry wondered where they'd been while he was speaking to Dumbledore, but he forgot about wondering this when Hermione sat Ron down in an armchair by the fire and went to the corner behind the stairs to fetch her cello case. She opened it carefully and withdrew the instrument and bow, and, sitting in a hard-backed chair that had been at one of the tables, without any tuning or preamble, she immediately began to play.

Harry caught his breath. The music was like nothing he'd ever heard before. He had a feeling it wasn't Bach, but he didn't know what it was. It sounded mournful and mellow at first, then dancing and cheerful, then peaceful like the moonlight on the lake....

As the music went on, he saw that Ron was listening intently, and then he

put his hands up and pulled the blindfold off his face, watching her play, watching the evolving emotions crossing her face as she went up to a painfully beautiful high note, then went crashing down to the depths again, like a musical picture of a huge wave breaking on the shore. Harry didn't know whether the true show was in Ron's face or in Hermione's, but he knew as he went back and forth, watching each of them, that he had a much more valuable and important birthday present he could give Ron that would mean more to him than any set of Quidditch balls.

When she finished playing there was a moment of awed silence in the common room, and then everyone present burst into enthusiastic applause. Hermione was turning every shade of red imaginable, and she put the cello back in its case carefully before stepping over to Ron, who was still grinning and clapping and *looking* at her in a way that broke Harry's heart. She gave him a hug and Harry saw more than heard her say (because of the noise of the clapping), "Happy birthday," before kissing him on the cheek. As the clapping died down, Harry went to his two best friends, who looked as though they'd each forgotten the rest of the world existed. *Draco Malfoy and Ginny look like that when they're together, too. That's how it's supposed to be.*

Ron was saying, "That was it, wasn't it? The piece you've been working on all year."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You wrote that?"

She colored again. "It's been rolling around my head for a while, and I had to write it down before I forgot it."

Harry shook his head in wonder at her talent, even having known the professional musician in his other life. He swallowed. Had she been primarily inspired by Ron? Was that why it was his birthday present?

He knew he couldn't put it off any longer. He was standing facing the two of them, holding the case of Quidditch balls, and he said to them, "Could we--could we go into the corridor to talk?"

They looked at him oddly, but nodded and followed him out of the common room. Once they were in the corridor, he started to speak, but the Fat Lady looked far too interested in hearing what he had to say for his taste, so he motioned for them to follow him a few yards farther along. He turned to them nervously, trying to work out how to do this, remembering Hermione wishing Ron a happy birthday when it was just after midnight the previous night and Ron looking like his heart was breaking....

"There's something I've been meaning to say to the two of you for a while," he said, trying to work his way into a very complicated speech. "I--

I know how you feel about each other. I'm not upset. If anything--if anything, it makes it easier for me to do the right thing and let Hermione go, because I know that you--" he nodded at Ron "--are there for her and care so much for her--"

The two of them were staring at him with open mouths.

"What?" Hermione said, flabbergasted. "Are you--are you breaking up with me?"

He smiled feebly at Ron. "Happy birthday?" he said uncertainly. Hermione's face was like a storm. She turned on her heel and stalked down the corridor; they heard her footsteps echoing away in the distance. Harry turned to Ron, extraordinarily confused.

"What did I say? The two of you have wanted to be together...."

Ron looked flabbergasted now. "Is that what you think? You think we've been betraying you, sneaking around behind your back? Hermione and I have done nothing to be ashamed of," he said, turning red. "And if you're wondering why she's hacked off--*Happy birthday*? Is she meant to be my present? Because I *don't* think she's appreciating you thinking of her as *property*, to keep or give away. Nice one, Harry; real nice."

Harry thought of the things Ron had said to him the previous August. Oh, so now *I'm* the insensitive one? Ron turned from him and went to the Fat Lady, who readmitted him to the Gryffindor common room after he gave her the password. Harry stood helplessly in the corridor, holding the leather case with Ron's initials on it.

"Ron?" he called after his best friend. "Um--I also got you some new Quidditch balls...." he said feebly, and probably too softly for Ron to hear.

Bloody hell, he thought.

* * * * *

Harry was very glad that so many people came running in the mornings now; if it were just Ron and Hermione, it would have been very awkward the morning after the birthday celebration. Neither one of them was talking to him. He saw Ginny and Malfoy looking at him with raised eyebrows, but he didn't feel like explaining what was going on. He was glad, for once, that Ron was in the habit of going up to the Gryffindor dorm showers instead of coming along to the prefects' bathroom, and he was also glad that Malfoy was unlikely to ask him nosy questions with Tony Perugia around.

He tried to focus on his schoolwork. His first class was Transfiguration,

and he was relieved to see Professor McGonagall looking the same as ever. She nodded at Harry with a strange look on her face when he entered the classroom; he wondered whether Dumbledore had told her about the timelines (or whether he had done it himself, but hadn't recalled this yet). He waved his wand over his desk, turning it into a beagle, then a fox, then a beagle, then a fox, in quick succession. He smiled, remembering momentarily playing Paper Chase when he was small, in his other life. Then he stopped himself again. *This life*, he reminded himself. *Think of this life.*

And he did. He stared at the desk which was a desk again, letting his mind float as he opened himself to another memory....

Near the beginning of October, he again went up to the Astronomy Tower after classes, as had become his wont, and found that he wasn't alone. Ginny stood looking out over the lawns, sloping past the lake and down to the forest. She whirled when she heard his step on the stone flags, looking guilty.

"Oh, Harry. I--I was wondering whether you might be coming up here to--you know."

He nodded at her. "You know I do this almost every day. Why did you need to wonder?"

She frowned. "That wasn't quite the right word. I--I've been trying to get up my nerve--"

"What, Ginny?"

She took a deep breath. "You mentioned my--my being a passenger," she said in a rush. "I--I think I'd like to try that." She looked as though it had taken every ounce of her courage to say it. He tried not to grin ear to ear. He loved it so much, and while he knew she wouldn't have quite the same experience that he had, not actually being the one doing the flying, he was glad there was someone with whom he could share this.

Hermione had sworn adamantly that she would never do it again, "Even if I needed to escape from an erupting volcano." Since the Saturday after her birthday, when he hadn't managed to tell her he loved her, he'd seen her and Ron in the common room late at night. He still didn't know where she was going in the evenings, and somehow, his pride prevented him from asking. Whatever it was, as she'd told Ron, she wasn't doing it for him, for Harry. That's fine, Harry thought. I don't expect her to live her entire life around me. But he'd

also been unable to forget the way she'd responded to Ron, and the way it had felt to hold Ginny close against him, under the Invisibility Cloak, while they waited to be able to get back upstairs past Filch....

"Are you sure, Ginny?" he asked, to give her an out, if she wanted one. She nodded vigorously. He smiled at her, feeling happier than he had in a long time. He warned her before he did it, then felt the change move through his body, his paws strike the stone, his mane surrounding his head, trailing onto his back; then he spread his wings. She unbuttoned her robe below the waist; she was wearing jeans underneath. When she threw her leg over him, her robes wound up being draped across his haunches. She gripped him tightly with her knees and leaned forward a little, sinking her fingers into his soft mane. He would have gasped if he'd had a human voice box, from the incredible sensation of her body being pressed against him, but all that came out of him was a sound like a rumbling purr.

She whispered into one of his curved ears, turning toward her voice, "I'm ready."

He took a deep breath and stepped up onto the parapet, leaping into the sky. He felt her gasp and grip his mane more tightly still, her knees starting to make his ribs ache. As he moved his wings, he felt her relax a little, although she was still hanging on securely, and after he'd been in the air for several minutes, heading straight over the forest, he dared to turn, going slowly, hoping she wouldn't let go and fall. Her grip tightened during the banking, but he could feel that she'd recovered again and was starting to be more at ease with riding a golden griffin who also happened to be Harry Potter.

As the sun was setting, he came back to the observation deck, landing lightly after spiraling down from high above it. When he landed, she didn't dismount right away. She seemed to be getting her breath still. Finally, she put one foot down and pulled her leg from over his back, immediately collapsing onto the deck. Harry changed back, looking at her anxiously.

"Are you all right? What's wrong? You--you hated it, didn't you?"

She looked up at him, swallowing. "No, Harry! It--it was wonderful. It's just that--that corkscrew spiral at the end....Well, let's just say it's a good thing I haven't eaten my dinner yet."

He laughed then, and she joined him briefly. "Sorry. It's the most efficient way to get down from a considerable height. But speaking of dinner, I'm starving. Do you need a minute to recuperate, or can you walk down the stairs now?"

"I--I think I need a lifetime to recuperate. I don't mean that in a bad way. That sounds bad, doesn't it? What I mean is--I can't believe you can do that whenever you want. You can just--do it. It's so amazing...."

He smiled bashfully now. "I'm glad you could experience a little of it, too. I'll never convince Hermione to do that again."

Ginny nodded, looking down. "How are things between the two of you?"

Harry looked out over the forest. "Fine, I guess. Well, maybe a little awkward. I don't know, really. I'm still trying to figure that out."

She patted his arm. "Well, you do that. When you've got someone to be with, really be with, and they're the one--it's like no other feeling in the world." He looked at her shining face, lit up with the happiness of a girl truly in love with her boyfriend, and Harry's stomach clenched. He tried to smile feebly.

"Yes. I can see that," he said softly, making her color.

She met him several times a week, having to wear progressively heavier clothes as the end of the term neared and the days became shorter and darkness began to shroud the castle even before classes ended for the day. One day, he decided to do something a little differently; when they were flying over the forest, he looked down for fires, easier to see now that it was almost the time of the winter solstice. At last, he was rewarded, and, finding a clearing nearby where he could corkscrew down--she was used to this by now--he 'explained' to her that there was someone he wanted her to meet. She didn't think this was much of an explanation, but when he led her to the next clearing, where the giants were cooking their usual ration of meat and Hagrid's mother was sitting on the ground, industriously sewing brown hides together to make a new cloak, she froze, as petrified as if she'd been looked at by a basilisk.

Fridwulfa looked up, crying, "Arry!" so loud they had to cover

their ears. A moment later, she had tempered her volume, having forgotten, since she wasn't around humans very much. She refrained from picking up Ginny, as she'd done with Hermione, and at length, Ginny felt comfortable enough to sit on the ground next to Harry, talking to Hagrid's mother and admiring her needlework and the beautiful furs she was working.

When he'd flown her back to the castle, she dismounted quickly, sitting down on the observation deck with a thump, breathing as though she was quite winded. Harry changed back and sat, watching her.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, then stood. Harry stood next to her, then caught her when she wobbled a bit upon taking a step toward the trap door. She fell into his arms, not bothering to back up, but gripping his forearms tightly.

"Oh, Harry. Just when I think you've shown me enough wonders--you go and outdo yourself...."

She looked up at him, her eyes shining in the moonlight, and, not thinking, he leaned down and kissed her. It was over quickly; it was not a lingering kiss. She didn't move afterward, but continued to gaze up at him. Finally, she backed up and brushed her hair out of her face; evidently she wasn't going to comment on being kissed.

"We should probably go down to dinner," she said evenly, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Harry didn't know whether she simply didn't think anything of his kissing her any more, as though he were just another brother, or whether she was indicating she was all right with him kissing her as something more than a brother. It hadn't been a deep kiss, so he had no way of judging.

But then, at Christmas--he gave her the amulet and she gave it back to him after he told her he loved her. He hadn't meant to say it; he'd thought it would be nice for her to have a remembrance of their having survived the Chamber of Secrets, as he had, but then the words I love you just poured out of him, as they hadn't when he was with Hermione. Then she said his name:

Draco.

He remembered something else from Christmas Day, something that hadn't risen to the surface of his consciousness before: when he emerged from the pantry and was about to go through the kitchen again, Ron and Hermione were there. Ginny must have passed them, he thought. They didn't look like they were expecting another person to come out of the pantry. They were standing very close together, talking softly, and then Ron held something up above their heads; Harry could see that it was a small green sprig of something. Hermione looked up at it, blushing, and then suddenly, Ron swooped down, kissing her. She clung to him for a half-minute before pulling away, beet red. Ron was grinning. She ran out of the kitchen again, laughing, and he ran after her, as though they were children playing a game.

When you've got someone to be with, *really* be with, and they're the one--it's like no other feeling in the world....

For weeks after the holiday, he went on solitary flights over the forest. He wasn't surprised about this, after her reaction on Christmas day. He no longer went up to the tower every day, as he didn't like flying when it was excessively windy or cold, and especially not when snow was coming down. It was a very snowy winter. Finally, after February had begun, he found her waiting for him at the parapet on an unseasonably warm day. Snow was melting all over the grounds, leaving large messy puddles and soggy patches of loamy ground. When they walked down to Hagrid's for class, or to the greenhouses, they all squelched with every step. Harry didn't see why they couldn't fly their brooms across the lawns when the terrain was so bad, but they weren't permitted to get to classes except on foot. Madam Hooch said it was bad enough trying to control fourteen flyers on the confines of the Quidditch pitch during a match, but she'd need to be called in to do air-traffic control if there were thirty students going down to the greenhouses or Hagrid's cabin and thirty students returning to the castle every period throughout the day.

He almost decided to leave upon seeing her, but she turned and said, "Harry!"

He stopped, his heart turning over. It was too painful to see her like this. He avoided her whenever possible. He tried not to look at her when he was running in the morning (the eight of them used the Great Hall now). If she was in the common room, he read in his dorm or in the library. He sat well away from her during meals.

"What?" he said softly.

"I--I'm so sorry if I hurt you. At Christmas. I miss you, you know. Spending time with you. If we couldn't still be friends, I don't know what I'd do--"

He swallowed and stepped forward. "It's colder high in air than on the ground. Are you dressed warmly enough?" If she was willing to put Christmas behind her, he was too. He knew he was pathetic, to want to be with her no matter what, even when she didn't return his feelings, but he couldn't help himself. He'd found himself on the verge of breaking up with Hermione many times, but the only time they seemed to be able to talk was after they'd slept together, which he avoided until she practically resorted to kidnaping him (he wished he were stronger at these times). And yet, to break up with her after that seemed cruel, as though he were judging her and finding her wanting. Sometimes she had a wistful look on her face, and he wondered whether she wished he were Ron....He wanted to do the right thing, but he was afraid he'd be without both of his best friends if he did....

She confirmed that she was dressed warmly enough and he changed and spread his wings. She climbed onto his back and clutched his mane in her hands, and they took to the air together, Harry's heart feeling like it would burst. They continued to meet again as the days grew longer and warmer and the sun set later and later. They never spoke of Christmas or the amulet, and Harry did not kiss her again.

Sometimes he spiraled down into a clearing in the forest which had flattened grass in it, and Ginny told him the first time they landed there that they needed to be careful because it might be a fairy ring, and if they walked in it, they would be compelled to dance for twenty-four hours straight or until they dropped down dead. Harry walked onto the flattened grass with impunity and immediately started to dance crazily.

"Oh, no! I'm stuck in a fairy ring!" he cried. She looked horrified, standing in the trees still, her hands clutching her cheeks. Suddenly Harry stopped; he had to bend over, laughing. She frowned, striding into the clearing and hitting him on the arm.

"Oh! Don't you do that to me, Harry Potter!" But then she couldn't help laughing too, and after that, they would go to the same clearing and lay down on the fragrant grass, gazing up at the sky. The fairy ring, as they began to call it, became

their favorite spot to gaze at the clouds, seeing various shapes in them, and talk to their hearts' contents about anything and everything--except his girlfriend and her boyfriend. And her brother.

On the day before her birthday, he was very late coming up to the tower, and even though the days were now longer than the nights, it was already getting dark.

"Oh, there you are! I thought you might not be coming."

"I was on my way, but Professor Flitwick nabbed me and made me help him; he was teaching the third year Hufflepuffs some beginning dueling charms and wanted me to demonstrate with him. Several of them told him the class should be over, but you know how he is at times--said the class would be over when he said it was over. Can't interrupt dueling, you know." He sighed. "When they noticed it was getting dark, he finally dismissed them--and me. Sorry if I made you wait."

She shrugged. "It's all right. The sky's so pretty right now--it'll be amazing to be up in it...."

He looked at her face, gazing with wonder at the twilit sky. He swallowed, then decided it would be wiser to just change into his griffin form, so he did. They had a glorious flight over the forest, and the sky put on a spectacular show for them. As usual, he went down in the clearing with the fairy ring. They laid on the grass, not touching, staring up at the sky, at the banks of clouds being tinged red and yellow and pink and orange.

"A Blast-Ended Skrewt!" Harry said suddenly, laughing, pointing at a horizontal cloud with what looked like a curled-up tail. Ginny also laughed.

"Professor Flitwick!" she said, pointing at a cloud that looked amazingly like the little dueling maniac.

"The Burrow!" Harry cried, pointing at a motley collection of shapes that looked rather like the Weasley home. He sighed, looking at it, yearning toward it. He wondered whether it was a source of comfort for Ginny or a place she was longing to escape. She still had two more years of school. At Christmas, she'd described having a row with her mother just before discovering the basilisk amulet in Knockturn Alley, and that had been at the end of her third year, when she still had four

years of school left.

Ginny was silent. Perhaps it had been insensitive of him to say he thought that cloud looked like the Burrow, and she was being silent rather than telling him not to mention her home. The "Burrow" cloud was breaking up now into smaller bits.

"Look! the house is breaking up into house-elves!" The shapes didn't really look remotely like elves, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. He waited for her to call him on it, to say, It does not look like house-elves, Harry Potter! And she she would laugh at him and he would get that warm feeling in his chest from hearing her laugh....

But there was no response. He turned his head. "Ginny?" he said, even as he was turning.

In the dim light of the clearing--he hadn't noticed it was so dark on the ground because he'd been gazing up at the sky-- he could see what looked like a large thick black blanket covering her completely. Recognizing the lethifold for what it was immediately, he sprang to his feet, drawing his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!" he shouted. The other students in his year had finally had the opportunity to practice conjuring a Patronus, but rather than practicing on dementors, they practiced on lethifolds which were being kept by Hagrid for Professor Lupin's use. They lived in several cages behind his hut. One of them must have escaped and made its way into the forest. The only spell that repelled a lethifold was the Patronus charm.

The ghostly image of the stag burst forth from his wand and galloped toward Ginny's prostrate form. Immediately, the lethifold withdrew from her as though some invisible person had simply pulled gently on a blanket covering her. She was lying still as a statue. The stag chased the flat black shadow through the trees, but Harry, for once, didn't stop to watch it. He went to his knees beside her, wringing his hands. He looked for her chest to rise and fall, but there was no movement. He wondered how long the dreadful thing had been cutting off her air. Was it too late? He leaned forward, pinching her nose and opening her mouth; he put his mouth against hers, breathing into it insistently, thinking, Come on Ginny, come on---

Harry wasn't sure how long it was before she began gasping. He pulled back, so relieved he thought he might cry. She

started coughing in earnest and he sat her up, holding her, but also patting her on the back. Soon the coughing subsided and she leaned against him, her head on his shoulder, his arms around her, his heart thumping so loudly he was certain she would be able to hear it.

She pulled back from him a little bit, holding onto his face, her eyes meeting his with a desperate expression. Then she completely shocked him by pulling him toward her, their mouths meeting. When she pulled back from the kiss, she whispered to him, "Thank you, Harry."

He nodded, caressing her cheek with his hand. It was getting very dark now and he could barely see her. Somehow, the dark made him bolder. "If anything had happened to you Ginny--" His voice caught; he couldn't continue, so he simply pulled her to him again. This time her mouth opened under his as she slid her arms around his neck, and he held her so close it was as though he was trying to make her a part of him. At length, their mouths separated, and he slid his lips down her throat, hearing her sigh in approval, and he was so happy he couldn't contain himself. He slid his lips along her jaw, then up to her right ear, and, after kissing it, whispered to her, "I love you so much, Ginny...."

She pushed him away, coming to her senses. She looked up at the sky. Her voice shaking, she said, "That thing came looking for food because it's getting dark. We should go back."

He nodded, looking away from her. For a few glorious minutes, it had been as though they were together, as though they were a couple. He swallowed and changed into his Animagus form, trying to push down his jumbled emotions, trying to think only the uncomplicated thoughts of a golden griffin. She straddled him quickly and he took off; soon they were winging their way back to the Astronomy Tower, and when they landed, he changed back into his human form immediately, then turned over, so she was sitting astride him while he looked up at her. He ran his hands up her arms; she looked down at him impassively as he put his hands behind her neck and pulled her mouth down to his. She let him do it, and he felt her open her mouth against his, kissing him back again. She was lying on top of him now and his arms were wrapped around her, holding her to him tightly. She was gurgling in her throat as they kissed and the movements she was making on top of him were driving him mad.

Then--it all stopped. She rolled off him and stood up, going to

the parapet, looking down at the dark grounds, and when Harry went to stand beside her, he saw that she was crying.

"Ginny--don't--"

"I can't help it, Harry. I'm sorry--I shouldn't have done that when we landed. I just--I just thought, one last time, it would be just one last time--"

"Last?" he whispered.

*"Well-- you did save my life." She said, with a small smile.
"Again."*

"You didn't do that in the Chamber of Secrets."

"Harry! I was twelve years old. And I had a huge crush on you," she added, reddening.

"So you only kiss boys who've saved your life whom you don't have huge crushes on?"

She reddened again, and then they were silent, both looking over the grounds, and slowly his hand came to be covering hers. But then she withdrew it. "I thought--I thought I could do this. Just be your friend. But I think I'm just leading you on to spend so much time with you. Until today, it seemed we were doing so well, that we were just good friends, and--"

"Ginny," he interrupted her. "You didn't kiss me like we were friends."

She looked down; she was still red. "I'm sorry Harry. I don't think I'll be coming up here any more. Thank you for saving me, but--but you can't kiss me any more, and I can't kiss you. And you can't tell me you love me. Please--try to understand. I never meant to hurt you. I just--"

--you're in love with Draco Malfoy." She nodded, not meeting his eyes.

"Good-bye, Harry," she said softly, and soon she was out of sight, through the trapdoor and going down into the castle.

Harry sat down on the stone flags, staring at the sky, letting the tears fall down his cheeks without wiping them. He didn't go down to dinner. When his watch said that it was midnight, he finally went down to Gryffindor Tower and climbed into his

bed without speaking to anyone. And even though he knew it would never happen, in his dreams, she was in his arms, up on the observation deck, and she was telling him that she loved him too....

"Potter!"

Harry looked up. Professor McGonagall was glaring at him, her hands on her hips. He blinked and swallowed.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"The headmaster wishes to see you," she said tersely, her eyes flashing, her mouth very thin.

Harry could see that Dumbledore was standing in the doorway to the Transfiguration classroom, with an expression that implied he was trying very hard not to laugh. Harry walked toward the door without looking at Ron, Hermione, or Professor McGonagall.

Once they were both in the corridor, the door to the classroom closed, Dumbledore started walking, and Harry understood that he was to walk beside him. He did this without saying a word; the headmaster too was silent. Finally, the old man stopped and turned to Harry.

"Harry, I understand that you meant well to offer yourself for Severus. But I simply cannot allow you to place yourself in danger in that way."

"But Professor--"

Dumbledore held up his hand and Harry stopped. "We're doing this my way. Yes, we will contact Wormtail and make him *think* we want to trade you for Snape, somewhere in the Forbidden Forest. We will not tell him about the Clash just yet. We will also tell him that you know who the heir is, and what the heir's purpose is. He will, of course, suspect that we are not dealing honestly with him. He will contact us to say what he wishes to do; we, of course, will know that *he* is not dealing honestly with *us*. But until we receive his response to the proposal, we shall have no way to evaluate our options. If he seems very eager to do things as we are proposing, I believe we should be even more cautious than if he produces his own plan."

Harry nodded. "Right. When are you sending the owl?"

"As soon as I walk you back to your class. Is everything all right, Harry?"

Harry rubbed his head. "I'm still getting back to normal. I've remembered a number of things, and sometimes I can just let my feet take me where they will, and I wind up going to the right place at the right time, but it

seems like, if I try to think about it too much, I can't quite get at the thoughts I want...."

Dumbledore nodded. "It will get better. Now, go back to class. I've told the elves they are to have an additional training session tomorrow at nine in the morning. I've cancelled all Quidditch practices. Flitwick will be meeting with you and the Dueling Club in the afternoon. I'm afraid that no matter how much time you need to get back all of your memories, we can't worry about that overmuch just now. You need to focus on the present. Can you do that, Harry?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir." He wouldn't let Dumbledore down.

Between classes, he told Ron and Hermione what Dumbledore had said; he just started talking to them in the corridor, hoping they wouldn't turn away from him after what he'd said the day before. Had he lost both of them?

But Ron nodded when he heard Dumbledore's plan. "He's got the right idea. And Elven Army tomorrow morning and Dueling Club in the afternoon? Good idea. We have to be ready for anything Wormtail might throw at us."

He and Hermione seemed to be avoiding each other during the rest of the day, Harry thought. Why do they think they have to prove they're not interested in each other? he wondered. *I said I wasn't upset.* He hoped that the battle plans would distract them enough that their collective relationship would normalize again soon.

The weekend passed in a blur of elves and dueling. His two best friends were all-business during this time, and he did not attempt to discuss private matters with them. They had the same schedule again Sunday that they had Saturday. Finally, at lunch on Monday, Dumbledore stopped by the Gryffindor table, whispering to Harry, "I'm off to see Snuffles and some of the others. I'll be back tomorrow. We haven't heard back yet from our friend." Harry grimaced at the idea of calling Wormtail their "friend." And yet, once--he had been. One of his parents' closest friends. Their Secret Keeper.

He went through the rest of his classes feeling tense; something about the day didn't feel right. Perhaps he was just being irrational to think that it was risky for Dumbledore to leave the school at this time, but by the end of the day, he was wishing he had asked him to stay. He had a very bad feeling something was about to happen.

And then it did.

He was up on the parapet, about to change into a griffin and fly over the

forest, when Ginny flung open the trapdoor and finished running breathlessly up the stairs. She was panting and red-faced, and Harry caught her arms, concerned for her. "What is it?" he demanded, seeing how distressed she was. She couldn't speak, but removed a parchment and an agate marble from her robe pocket. The agate was painted to resemble a disembodied eyeball. Harry frowned at it; he took the parchment from her and read:

Dear Draco,

Your misguided headmaster thinks he is in charge of the world. I am writing to you to tell you that this is not so. He has offered to trade Harry Potter for your head of house. While it would please my master greatly for me to be able to give him Harry Potter, it would also please him for me to give him you. He also seems to think that I do not know the Forbidden Forest like the back of my hand and will need to give me instructions about where to go to make the trade. I have spent far too much time in that forest in my lifetime not to know exactly where I want this to take place. He will not manipulate me.

If he wants his precious Potions Master back, the only thing I am willing to take in trade is you. Use this magic eye to see where to come for your head of house. Come alone and before it is too late. You carry the Mark; surely you have felt yourself being summoned repeatedly in the last six months? If you wish it, you might have another chance to serve the Dark Lord. You will have to pay for your previous disobedience, but in the end, our Master would have another servant, and that is what is important.

Remember--quickly and alone.

It was unsigned. Harry looked up at her stricken face. He held out his hand; she was holding the agate carefully between her thumb and forefinger. She gave it to him and he rolled it in his palm, then closed his fist on it tightly, starting to get a foggy picture in his mind. As the fog cleared, he saw Severus Snape, haggard and bony, in the grips of very, very large black pincers.

Aragog.

Or one of his children. Harry could see the horrible multiple eyes of the creature; they weren't cloudy and blinded like Aragog's, so it probably

wasn't him, but that hardly mattered. He could see that the creature had something in one of his other pincers.

Draco Malfoy.

He'd already gone, and he'd been captured too. His head flopped about on his neck. Harry prayed that he was merely unconscious, that his neck hadn't snapped. He swallowed and looked up at Ginny.

"Who found the letter and the eye?"

"Mariah."

Harry drew his lips into a line. He was still undecided on Mariah. He remembered the strangeness with the gloves. Then he shook himself, trying to focus on Ginny. "You've seen it, haven't you?" He hated to think of her reaction to seeing what he had when he'd held the agate.

She nodded, looking stricken. "Oh, Harry!" She threw herself onto him and he held her as she sobbed. He couldn't stand seeing her so distressed. After letting her cry a little, he held her at arms' length.

"We're going to get him back. We're going to get them *both* back. Understand?" She nodded her tear-stained face. "Now, Dumbledore left the castle this morning, which means McGonagall's in charge. Go to her and tell her to round up the teachers. We need to do this right. Those are Acromantulae out there; most curses and hexes will bounce right off them. And it's not just a couple of them, either. It's a bloody colony. I'll get the other members of the Dueling Club, and I'll have Ron and Hermione go talk to the elves. We'll probably only be able to get McGonagall to use students as a backup, but hopefully we won't be needed if the teachers and elves are in on it. Oh! And I'll send Hedwig to alert the giants. They can't do magic, but they're half again as big as the largest spider in the colony. You know what to do?"

She nodded, looking strangely calm. "Go to McGonagall."

"Good girl. Let's go!"

They raced down the tower steps, diverging at the bottom to go in different directions. Harry raced to the Owlery, scratching out a note with the quill kept chained to the wall there, written on the cheap foolscap kept in the Owlery for people who arrived without parchment or an otherwise pre-written document.

He watched Hedwig fly off, then realized that there was another letter he needed to write. He tried to describe the situation as clearly and succinctly as possible, then addressed it to Mr. Weasley at the Ministry and tied it to

another owl's leg. Harry wasn't sure there was anyone at the Ministry who was trustworthy other than Mr. Weasley, but he had to take a chance that Ron's and Ginny's father could get some Aurors to the castle.

He ran from the Owlery to Gryffindor Tower to find Ron and Hermione, so they could rally the elves. But when he reached the portrait hole, Ginny was emerging from it with her brother and Hermione, as well as the other Gryffindor Dueling Club members: Parvati, Ruth, and Tony.

"Harry!" Ron said urgently. "We have a problem. We can't find the teachers anywhere. They're gone."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean, *gone*?"

Ginny wrung her hands. "I can't find any of them anywhere. They're just-- gone."

He pushed past them, flinging the password carelessly at the Fat Lady, then sprinting up the stairs to the dorm once he was in the common room. He took the map from his trunk and activated it; as soon as he saw what was what, he ran down the stairs and out the portrait hole again, clutching the parchment tightly in his hands. He knelt on the stone floor and the others joined him as he spread out the map for them to see. Ruth, Parvati and Tony widened their eyes upon seeing the map.

Harry pointed at the Slytherin common room. "Here they are. See? It looks like every teacher's name is there. Except for Dumbledore; he's away."

Ginny gasped. "You think something has happened there, and that's why Mariah or Millicent called the teachers to come to their common room?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know. Look here--" He pointed to the corridor outside the Slytherin common room, where there were dots labeled *Mariah Kirkner* and *Millicent Bulstrode*.

"Are they guarding the entrance?" Ron asked. They all looked at each other in horror. Was this *planned*? Then Mariah and Millicent seemed to have given up on entering their own common room, and they started moving down the corridor toward the stairs to the entrance hall. Harry moved his eyes over the map; there were other dots moving toward their position now: the Head Boy and Head Girl, Liam Quirke and Cho Chang, who had both made it into the Dueling Club in October. (They'd practiced over the summer.) Justin Finch-Fletchley was with them; he'd also qualified for Dueling Club this time. Evan Davies, Susan Bones and Ernie MacMillan were also headed their way.

"The whole Dueling Club is coming up here," Harry said, pointing out the

labeled dots. "They must have noticed something wrong too."

He swallowed. The headmaster was away. The teachers were in the dungeons. The Dueling Club was gathering, and they would be looking to him, their leader, to tell them what to do. He hoped the giants would be able to do something. And Hagrid could call off Aragog. No--wait. Hagrid was in the Slytherin common room too. That wasn't good; that wasn't a place he would ever go voluntarily, emergency or no emergency.

He called this to their attention. "I think--it's possible that the teachers are being held prisoner. Look at this: the student names in the common room are Zabini, Nott, Crabbe and Goyle. Their dads are all Death Eaters. The other Slytherin students are in their dorms--maybe they're prisoners, too. Perhaps Mariah and Millicent couldn't get into the common room because the password was changed."

He turned to Tony, who was an incredibly fast runner. "Go down to the kitchens and find Dobby the house-elf and bring him here." Tony nodded and ran off without asking any questions. He turned to the others.

"The whole Dueling Club will probably be here in a minute--except for Malfoy and Tony. We're going to have to be the ones to go into the forest for Malfoy and Snape." He turned to Ginny. "You have told them about Malfoy and Snape?" She nodded.

"Good. Of course, when the others get here we'll have to explain again. Anyway, I've already sent an owl to the giants--"

"The *what?*" Parvati and Ruth said together. Harry swallowed.

"Hagrid's mum and some friends have been living in the forest for about a year and a half now. They'll help us, don't worry. They're all loyal to Dumbledore."

Suddenly, the other members of the Dueling Club appeared from around the corner. Ernie, Evan, Liam, Justin, Cho and Susan were winded, and Mariah and Millicent looked positively frantic.

"Harry!" Millicent exclaimed breathily when she saw him. "Blaise Zabini! He's gone mad! Says he's You-Know-Who's agent at Hogwarts! He's--he's taken the teachers prisoner in Slytherin House and we can't get in!"

Harry nodded. "We know. And a Death Eater has Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape in the forest at the mercy of giant carnivorous spiders."

She frowned. "*What?* Professor Snape is--"

"No," he said, interrupting her. "He was never on sabbatical. He's been a

prisoner all this time. I had Dumbledore offer to trade me for him, and now this is what's happened...."

Hermione put her hand on his arm. She seemed to have forgotten about being hacked off at him for breaking up with her. "You can't blame yourself, Harry. Who else would have offered themselves up like that?"

He looked at her. "We have to assume that what we're going to find in the forest is a trap. We go knowing that we might none of us come back." He looked around at them all. "It was going to be the teachers, but someone thought of that and took the teachers prisoner, where we can't get at them. That leaves us--inexperienced students. And they know it. Except--this is the Hogwarts Dueling Club. We're the best of the best." He looked around at them all, trying to change their expressions of fear and uncertainty into confidence and malevolence. "*They don't know who they're dealing with.*"

Harry felt Ginny shiver beside him, and he tried to give her a reassuring smile, knowing that she feared Draco Malfoy was already dead. But now Tony had arrived with Dobby, and Harry had to concentrate on something else.

"Dobby! You're my field sergeant. I can't be present to lead you, but I have an assignment that only you and the Elven Army can handle."

Dobby hesitated. "I--I know that you is my general, Harry Potter sir, but--but where is Headmaster? A battle? Should not Headmaster say what I is to do?"

"Headmaster--er, Dumbledore isn't here Dobby, and we have a problem. Two problems, actually. The one I want you to work on is here in the castle. Some Slytherin students, led by Blaise Zabini, have taken the teachers prisoner in the Slytherin common room. We can't get in. Even Slytherins loyal to Dumbledore can't get in. They changed the password. But *you* and the other elves *can* get in."

Dobby nodded his head. "Of course we is able to get in, Mr. General Harry Potter, sir!"

"Right. And then--remember your training. Try to bind up the ones who are doing this, rather than throwing people around with hover charms and such, all right? And try to figure out how they've subdued the teachers. It might be a potion, Imperius, or some other curse. If you manage to get them out of there before we get back, tell them we've gone into the forest and need their help, if they feel able. I'm trusting you, Dobby. And if you get that done and we're not back--we wouldn't say no to some help from the elves, either. Come to the forest if you can. You and the other elves are the only ones who can get into the Slytherin common room, Dobby.

I'm relying on you."

Dobby stood to attention and saluted smartly, then *popped!* out of sight again. Harry looked up at the others. They were all looking to him, even Liam and Cho, the Head Boy and Head Girl. *They're all relying on me.*

"Now," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "Everyone get their broomsticks--or borrow someone else's broomstick if it's a good one and yours isn't terribly new. We need the best equipment. Also, go back to your houses--" he pointed at Mariah and Millicent "--except for you two-- and tell all of the students to meet up on the parapets. Take any tower-- the West Tower, the Astronomy Tower--it doesn't matter. Millicent and Mariah--check all the public rooms, like the library and Trophy Room and Great Hall. Get every student in the castle. Everyone should be up on the parapets in fifteen minutes."

They all dispersed; the Gryffindors ran back into the portrait hole; Ron went for brooms while Harry gathered all of the remaining students of the house into the common room and told them that the Dueling Club was going to the forest to rescue Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy from a Death Eater and some giant spiders because some Slytherin students were keeping the teachers prisoner in the dungeons. They were all shocked.

"I need for everyone to get their brooms and come up onto the parapets. The Dueling Club will fly out first. Katie," he put his hand on her shoulder, "I need you to keep track of the time. If an hour has passed after we've left and no one has come back, and the teachers and house-elves haven't emerged from the dungeons to help, we're going to need a second wave. Begin with seventh-years. Pass the responsibility of watching the time to a sixth-year before you go. After an hour, the sixth-years will go, on down to the fourth-years. I don't want third year and younger students to try to fight. Hopefully it won't even come down to needing fourth- or fifth-years." His voice caught, and a tear rolled down Katie's cheek. He thought of hearing her give birth, in his other life. He'd thought of many things about this life that were better in the few days he'd been back, but he'd never expected *this....*

The students of Hogwarts moved upward like so many rushed commuters trying to emerge from a tube station in the heart of London. Harry led the Gryffindors up the stairs of the West Tower, and when he emerged on the stone deck, the early evening sky starting to darken, he felt his heart leap into his throat as he saw the throngs of other students lining the parapets of the castle. They were everywhere.

He looked to Ginny, whose boyfriend was in the forest; he thought of Snape, the only father he'd ever known. This *had* to work. He saw that she was holding the agate eyeball charm. He held out his hand for it and

she didn't hesitate to give it to him; he held it tightly in his palm and closed his eyes, seeing that they were still there; he saw Pettigrew now, nearby, and someone else--

He swallowed. *The heir.*

Having confirmed that Snape and Malfoy were still alive--for now--he handed the eyeball charm back to Ginny, and as he did so, an owl that seemed to come from the direction of the village suddenly alit on the parapet where Harry was leaning. He jerked away from it, then saw that it was trying to give him a letter. He took it off the bird's leg and it immediately took off again, not waiting for a response. Harry read the letter with his heart in his throat, then crumpled it. Ron and Hermione leaned in close to him. In spite of the terrible letter, he felt a warmth around his heart; they were a team again. All animosities and hurts were forgotten; perhaps only temporarily, but he knew that if anyone could rise above petty arguments to do the work at hand, it was Ron and Hermione. It was one of the things he loved the most about the two of them.

"What is it?" Hermione demanded to know.

Harry looked up at them, thinking about the letter again, feeling angrier than he'd ever been in his life. "It's Dumbledore. This says he's dead. I refuse to believe it."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, horrified. Ron set his jaw, looking as angry as Harry felt. Harry thought, *I will not let you rattle me, Wormtail. I refuse.* He pointed his wand at his throat, saying, "*Sonorus.*" Taking a deep breath, he began speaking.

"This letter," he said, holding up the crumpled parchment, "says that Albus Dumbledore is dead. I do not believe it!" A shocked gasp traveled through the crowd. "But whether he is alive or dead, we can't give up the fight! This is what many of us have been both dreading and anticipating," he said evenly, his voice carrying to the farthest student. "We are battling Death Eaters and those sympathizing with Death Eaters right here at Hogwarts. And we're on our own. Now, some of you have experienced losses this year--" He glanced at Jules Quinn now, who was orphaned just a month ago, he now remembered, in a Death Eater attack on his home. "--but we do not intend for the losses to include Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy, who have already stood up to dark wizards and shown where their loyalties lie.

"You have been told what we have to do, but not how we are going to do it. There is a colony of Acromantulae in the Forbidden Forest--giant spiders. We will be fighting at least one Death Eater, maybe more, but the giant spiders will be the most difficult to manage. Most curses and hexes will bounce right off them. It will be necessary to aim for their eyes or use

physical force--like conjured ropes--to subdue them. I've written to the Ministry, asking them to send Aurors, but we don't know how long that will take and we're not going to wait. The Dueling Club is going first. Katie Bell will keep time." He saw Ginny hand Katie the eyeball charm. "After an hour, if the Aurors haven't come, the seventh-years will go. An hour after that, sixth-years. No one under fourth year should try to go. If no one has returned an hour after the fourth-years have gone--" He swallowed. "You may assume that we have lost the battle."

Silence. He wished he could say something more stirring, more confident. He wished he could say they *would* win the battle. Instead, he ended the amplifying charm and put his wand away, looking around at the other students with whom he was about to go into battle. He loved every one of them, in their way, and the thought of losing any of them made his stomach turn over and sweat break out on his palms. Not a sound came from anyone on the parapets after the echo of his voice died away. All of the students looked toward the forest, dark and ominous and forbidden to them for as long as they could remember.

It was Ruth who started it.

Harry remembered her clear voice singing the Ravel; now it lifted in a familiar [hymn](#). He was surprised she knew it, but perhaps all English schoolchildren learned it when they were young, regardless of religion or whether they went to wizard or Muggle primary school or, like the Weasleys, stayed at home and learned at their mothers' knees. He had learned it in the village school in Little Whinging, but it had never occurred to him to wonder how universal a thing it might be on their small island.

"*And did those feet in ancient time...*"

Then Will Flitwick's flute of a voice joined hers:

"...*walk upon England's mountains green?*"

And even though Harry thought of it as an English hymn, the voices of all of the others around him picked up the tune and enlarged it, as though this had been planned, as though it were rehearsed. And even though they were facing battle in "Scotland's forests green" and not on "England's mountains green," and even though some of them were from Ireland or Scotland or Wales, or the Channel Islands, or Orkney or Shetland, it hardly mattered; it was what the song represented that mattered. Solidarity. Hope. A cause that was right and just.

The voices swelled as the second verse began, the parapets resounding with the anthem, and Harry's eyes stung; he began to join in croakily, because of the tightness in his throat, Blake's words never seeming more poignant and more laden with meaning:

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight:
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

The pure young voices ended in unison, as though one throat had sung. In the silence that followed, Harry knew they were all mentally offering up hopeful prayers of protection and guidance. *Bring us all back safely*, he thought over and over.

Then the silence was broken by Ron straightening up and raising his wand like a cavalryman's sabre, and crying with his deep, authoritative voice:

"For Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore!"

The other members of the Dueling Club took up the battle cry, proclaiming to the darkening sky the names of their teacher, their comrade, their headmaster:

"SNAPE, MALFOY AND DUMBLEDORE!"

The fifteen warriors of Hogwarts, the cream of the school, rose into the air as one, their wands raised as Ron's was. Harry blinked back his tears, hovering between Hermione and Ron, thinking of how brave she was being to *fly* into battle, when she *hated* flying; looking to his right, he thought about how courageously Ron was planning to go up against *spiders*, of all things. But they each looked like they'd chosen not to think about these fears. Harry nodded at his two best friends, his right hand and his left, and took out his own wand again.

Bring us all back safely, bring us all back safely...

"Snape, Malfoy and Dumbledore!" he cried, his voice strong and sure as he shot forward, leading the others into battle. They flanked him, seven on each side of him in a V-formation, driving toward the trees.

The other students on the parapets took up the battle cry and repeated it as the warriors flew toward the forest, and the mountains echoed it back until it seemed that the entire landscape reverberated with the sound.

Chapter Twenty

The Time of the Wolf

The members of the Dueling Club, minus Draco Malfoy, their comrade, flew in silence through the trees. They were no longer in formation and flew much more slowly than when they'd soared into the sky from the castle's crowded parapets. Harry looked at Ron, then Hermione, who had stayed near him. He had never felt so anxious and tense in his life. It was one thing when he and Hermione had ventured into the forest just over a year ago to get Ron, or when he and Ron had followed the spiders into the forest in their second year. It was quite another thing to be taking twelve other students into danger--possibly more if the seventh-years joined them, or the students in his own year. Harry felt as though the burden of leadership was a literal weight on his shoulders.

For the most part, the others flew in clumps with their closest friends; Cho and Liam were near each other, being Head Girl and Head Boy, and Justin also stayed close to Liam, looking very nervous. Mariah and Millicent Bulstrode stayed close together, and so did the fifth-year Gryffindors, Ginny, Ruth and Tony. Parvati, Susan Bones and Ernie MacMillan formed another group--Harry remembered that they tended to work together in Herbology, usually with Lavender and Hannah as well. Evan Davies, also from Ravenclaw, like Cho and Liam, flew alone, a short distance behind.

Suddenly, there was an earth-shattering explosion, and Harry almost ran right into an enormous old tree that had to be five feet in diameter. He came to a full stop, as did the others, without being told. The group closest to him and Ron and Hermione were the fifth-year Gryffindors. He directed his words at Ginny.

"We're going up above the trees to do reconnaissance. Stay here. We'll be right back. Tell the others." He didn't speak very loudly, and then nodded to Hermione and Ron, and together they aimed their brooms up at the dense forest roof, putting their arms before their faces when supple leafy limbs threatened to blind them (or take Harry's glasses off). In moments they had emerged above the green canopy. Harry stared at the swaying tops of the trees in the forest; everything looked peaceful. But then he turned, just as Ron and Hermione both gasped, and he saw flames shooting into the sky from the direction of the village. Vivid green against the sapphire sky, the ghastly skull and snake of the Dark Mark hovered above the destruction.

He set his jaw stubbornly. "Well," he said. "That's one more thing to do, then, isn't it." It was more of a statement than a question. He felt as though he had become a very hardened person, as though the boy who had cried with Draco Malfoy on the floor of the cave where his mother died had never existed--and technically, he hadn't. He felt angry and murderous, even more angry than when he'd tried to put the Killing Curse

on Tom Riddle.

"Come on," he said tersely to his two best friends, descending into the trees once more. When they'd reached the others again, he motioned with his head for them to gather near so he wouldn't have to shout.

"It wasn't in the forest," he informed them in a low voice. "Death Eaters are attacking the village. Or so it seems. We can't let ourselves be distracted; it might be a ruse. If we can, when we're done here, we'll look into it. In the meantime, I'm sure someone will summon Aurors. Which means the Aurors I was hoping might come to help us will probably be called to work in Hogsmeade. We can't count on them coming here. If we need them, in--" he checked his watch "--fifty minutes the seventh-years will be coming. One of us will go up above the trees at that time to watch for them and guide them to our position. Hopefully that will be possible, since it wouldn't do for the reinforcements to get lost just when we really need them."

They all nodded and went back to their previous configurations, floating cautiously through the trees once more. Hermione and Ron flew near him, looking around tensely, and Harry wished he dared go into battle as a golden griffin; he could see far better in the dim light with his griffin's eyes. Hermione startled him when she said dreamily, "*Le temps du loup.*"

Ron stared at her. "You have to go to the loo?" he whispered fiercely. "It's a hell of a time to think of that, isn't it?"

She laughed softly. "*Le temps du loup.* It's French for 'twilight.' That's all. It's a very poetic way of putting it. I like twilight," she said, her voice shaking as she looked around the still forest. "Usually." Ron also looked uneasy about the quiet around them. "Damn long way of saying 'twilight,' if you ask me," he said, as though he were trying to forget the reason for them being in the forest.

"I *said* it was poetic," Hermione said, sounding more like her old self to Harry. "There is a word that *literally* means 'twilight.' It sounds like some sort of growth you want to get rid of. Extremely unpoetic, especially for French. The literal meaning of '*le temps du loup*' is 'the time of the wolf.'"

Harry snorted. "Yeah. How poetic," he said, his voice hard. "I always find it poetic to refer to creatures that could rip my throat out without a thought...." Hermione made a face at him, and Ron started to laugh but stifled it.

Harry looked at the two of them again. He'd seen the heir when he'd held the eyeball charm. He hadn't told anyone yet. He should tell them about the heir, but would they believe him? How would he explain knowing this? The heir was out there with Wormtail, waiting for them, and if Voldemort

put an Obedience Charm on him the way he had with Malfoy and ordered him to do this, he'd be *compelled* to carry out his mission--to the death, if necessary....

Malfoy! He hadn't told him about the Obedience Charm! He smacked himself on the forehead.

Ron looked at him. "What's with you, Harry?"

"Um--" He had to do it, even at the risk of their thinking he was mad. "I just remembered two things that are kind of important...."

"What?" Hermione wanted to know; she'd been slightly ahead, and now she came back to where Harry and Ron were hovering. Harry swallowed.

"It's something Voldemort did to Malfoy when he was a baby. He put a charm on him--an Obedience Charm. Voldemort had to give up some of his power to do it, but he probably thought it would be worth it in the end. And he still managed to not be killed by the curse rebounding on him when he tried to kill me, so it couldn't have taken *that* much out of him...."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "What's the effect of the charm?" she whispered.

"If he gives Malfoy a direct order, he has to say yes or no to it. If he says no, he drops down dead, and all of the power that went out of Voldemort when he put the charm on Malfoy would die with him. Voldemort doesn't get that back. If Malfoy says yes to a direct order, then he *will* do it, if it's at all possible. If he's told to kill someone who's already dead, for instance, there's no effect. And he can't personally put any spell on Voldemort that would harm him in any way. He couldn't give him so much as a hangnail."

Hermione and Ron looked at him open-mouthed. "How long have you known this?" Ron demanded.

"Since--well, I guess since the night before your birthday--"

"How?"

"I--I can't explain. After I fell in the common room, and I went to bed--I just knew. I know that sounds odd, but it's like--like something I knew, but information I couldn't get at. I can't explain it...."

"That prat is my sister's *boyfriend*," his voice rose, "and he has to do whatever You-Know-Who tells him to or die! Well, let me see, what's his motivation for *not* doing whatever You-Know-Who says....Oh, right, there

isn't any, because Malfoy's not about to let himself die just to avoid being a monster's puppet!" Ron was livid. "How could you not mention that? For all we know You-Know-Who's been controlling him all year. Ginny's the only sister I've got!"

Hermione shot Harry a look; well, Harry was wondering whether either one of them had told him about his missing sisters since September. It seemed they hadn't. Yet another thing he would have to deal with eventually....

"I'm sorry, Ron. I--I didn't think of it in terms of Ginny being in danger. I should have done. That was really stupid." Now he felt a panic rising in his chest. *Ginny. Ginny could be in danger....* "I--I've been feeling like my head has been spinning for the last few days....Like there's so much I have to tell both of you...."

"Like breaking up with me?" Hermione said softly.

"Hermione--I've got something to tell you that's probably going to upset you more than that. It's about Voldemort's heir. It isn't a son; it's a grandson. Years ago, he had a daughter, and she had a son. Last summer I had a sort of vision, through my scar. I saw Voldemort initiating his heir, giving him the Dark Mark, but I couldn't see his face at the time. Or rather, I couldn't remember who it was afterward. I knew I knew him, but it was all fuzzy. Now I know who it is."

She looked at him shrewdly, waiting. "Well, Harry?"

"Hermione, the heir is Viktor Krum."

She covered her mouth in horror. Ron, if possible, was turning redder than he had when he'd learned of Malfoy's Obedience Charm. "*Krum!* Damn, Harry! Did you *also* not know that until last week?" Harry nodded miserably.

Hermione swallowed. "And I--I let him--"

Harry thought of them kissing in the entrance hall, and on the train platform in London. "He was probably under Imperius when he helped Lucius Malfoy and his helpers kidnap you, and then they probably put a memory charm on him. He may not even have known he was involved. Or he didn't. He may know now."

"*That's* why the test showed that his parents were really his parents! They *are* his parents. What it didn't test for was whether he was related to You-Know-Who." Harry nodded, remembering being initiated in his other life, remembering his shock when he'd looked at Viktor's still face before hurling his body into the sea. He'd long ago eliminated Viktor as a

possibility, because of that test, and to find that it was him all along had been very jarring.

Hermione's eyes widened; she seemed to have thought of something else. "You know what? In fourth year, Moody--I mean Crouch--introduced us for the first time. In the library. You don't think--"

"He used some spell to get the two of you together? Probably not. It sounds like he was just hoping nature would take its course. Two teenagers and all..." Harry flushed.

Ron exploded, "So *that's* how all that started? *Crouch* introduced you?"

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed. "That's all in the past now. I'm not the one in danger from him any more. Think of Cho!"

Harry jerked his head up. *Cho!* He'd fixed up Viktor and Cho. He'd forgotten all about that. He felt like the stupidest person on the planet. "They're still together?" he asked.

Hermione frowned at him. "What's wrong with you, Harry? Of course they are. We just saw them together in Hogsmeade two weeks ago. And you're the one who told me that he's been coming to the castle to see her quite often, since he's taken Dumbledore literally about everyone who was here during our fourth year always being welcome." Two lines appeared between her brows as her frown deepened. "You *know* all this, Harry."

Harry shook his head, wishing he'd remembered about Cho and Viktor... "The question is--" he said slowly, moving his broom forward again, soon followed by the others. "Is Cho oblivious to what he is and what he's now doing, is she being controlled by him, or is their relationship totally separate from everything else?"

"Harry!" Ron said suddenly, ignoring Harry's question and coming to a full stop. "I think I know who could have helped Blaise Zabini find a way to get all of the teachers into the Slytherin common room. *Krum.*"

Harry frowned. "Viktor?"

"He and Zabini got to know each other during our fourth year. The Durmstrang students all sat at the Slytherin table, remember? And even though he spent a lot of time in the library making eyes at Hermione," she stuck her tongue out at him, "that doesn't mean he didn't get invited to the Slytherin common room at some point."

"Actually," Hermione said slowly, "he did. He mentioned it once in passing. I think it was at the Yule Ball. He was talking about the green lamps."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, we remember those. From when we took the Polyjuice Potion and went there." Harry remembered it even better from being a Slytherin for almost six years (before going to prison), but he didn't dare say that.

He rode along, wondering now, *Is Cho a friend or enemy? Have I put her at risk or has she already turned against us? If she's doing anything for Viktor, is it of her own free will or is she being controlled? Is Hogwarts' Head Girl a tool of a Death Eater, of Voldemort's Heir himself?* Thinking about it was making his head hurt.

"We need to be cautious around Cho. Until we can tell which side she's on." Ron and Hermione agreed with him. Harry glanced at Cho, Liam and Justin, flying about twenty feet ahead. He and his two best friends resumed flying in silence, all clearly thinking about what Harry had said about the Obedience Charm and the heir.

What a mess, Harry thought.

When they had been moving through the forest for ten more minutes, still seeing nothing, Harry pointed up, and the others all followed him through a gap in the trees, until they were hovering above the forest in the dark sky, the flames from Hogsmeade and the glowing windows of Hogwarts visible but seeming so distant it felt as though they were on a foreign campaign.

"We need to do more reconnaissance," Harry told them. "This is getting us nowhere. I want Ginny and Tony to come with me to look for the giants. I have a pretty good idea of where their camp is." No one asked him why this was, to his relief. "Hermione, you go with Liam and Justin toward the northeast--" he pointed for everyone's benefit "--and Ron, you go with Cho and Evan to the southeast." He wanted to put Hermione with Liam because he knew that Liam was a very protective Head Boy; he'd feel it his responsibility to make sure nothing happened to the other two, although Hermione could more than hold her own. Ron, on the other hand, now knew to keep an eye on Cho for any odd behavior, and Evan was an excellent duelist and could take care of himself. "The rest of you stay here and wait; if you see red sparks shoot into the sky, one or more of us is in trouble. No more than two people at a time go to one of the three groups to help. Everyone understand?" They all nodded. "All right then. Let's go."

Harry watched Hermione, Liam and Justin depart to his left, and Ron, Cho and Evan to his right. He nodded at Ginny and Tony and the three of them surged forward, Harry slightly ahead, as he had a feel where to look for the giants. It was easier to fly above the trees than down amidst the trunks and reaching branches, and the rustling leaves about five feet below them created the illusion that they were flying only a little bit higher

than the terrain, when in reality they were far, far above the ground.

When they reached it, Harry almost missed it; he had to double back and check again, he'd flown over the clearing so quickly. Ginny and Tony followed, hovering next to him, when he stopped and pointed down at the fire the giants had left burning. They aimed their brooms downward and hovered just above the ground in the giants' camp. It was deserted, but something about the desertion didn't look recent, other than the fire. Something about the camp felt very different from when Harry had brought Ginny to meet Hagrid's mother. He alit and picked up something familiar; the parchment on which he'd written to Fridwulfa. it had a large dirty thumbprint on it; it had been read. Harry looked down at the ground, followed the huge footprints to the edge of the large clearing. Tony and Ginny followed him cautiously, still riding their brooms, both with their wands out. Harry walked with his broomstick clutched in his left hand, his wand in his right.

He turned to them. "We should put out the fire. They must have rushed right off. It'll just take us a moment, using our wands."

Ginny and Tony nodded, and the three of them returned to the fire, aiming streams of water at it from their wands. Harry stood near where Ginny was hovering. As they directed the water at the fire, Harry spoke softly, not looking at her, "Ginny. I have something to tell you. It's about Malfoy. Er--Draco."

Then he plunged right in before he could lose his nerve and told her about the Obedience Charm, hearing her gasp as he explained the consequences for her boyfriend if he either refused to carry out any order from Voldemort or agreed to one.

The fire was out. Harry finally tore his eyes away from the damp, smoking remains to look up at Ginny. "I'm sorry to tell you this way, Ginny. I only just had a chance to tell Ron, and he was furious because you could have been in so much danger all this time...."

"How? All--" she swallowed. "All we have to do is keep Draco away from You-Know-Who and there won't be a problem."

Harry sighed. He recalled Voldemort using the *Tempus Fugit* spell to talk to him on September first. "Sometimes he's not so easy to avoid."

Tony flew over to them. "We should get going," he said, sounding urgent. Harry mounted his broom again and the three of them lit their wands. They flew out of the clearing, Harry in the lead, easily following path the giants had taken; every broken tree branch, every crushed fern or shrub told them they were headed in the right direction. He knew that in the previous year and a half the giants had been living in the forest, they'd

come to know it very well. He thought it likely they knew where the spiders lurked. He and Ron hadn't been paying attention to where they'd gone when they had encountered the spiders in their second year. They'd simply followed the small creatures fleeing the castle because of the basilisk.

As they flew through the trees, Tony came near to Harry. "You think the others are all right? The ones who are waiting for us?" His voice shook as he asked.

"Hmmm?" Harry said, examining a broken branch. He looked up at Tony and had a sudden vivid image from a couple of months earlier of Tony and Ron and Katie driving toward the Hufflepuff goals, tossing the Quaffle back and forth effortlessly....and then after Harry had caught the Snitch and all of Gryffindor House was jumping on the team members back on the ground, a girl with shining hazel eyes and smooth brown hair pulled back into a ponytail was giving Tony a bashful hug before retreating shyly, while his eyes followed her longingly....

"Do you mean all of them--or Ruth especially?" Harry asked him, raising his eyebrows. Now he remembered other instances, in the common room or at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, when Tony had been giving her furtive glances, and she was looking right back.

"You fancy her, don't you?" Tony was a handsome boy with chiseled features, dark, brooding eyes and short, curling dark hair.

Tony grimaced. "I haven't got a prayer. She'd never go for me....If she did, I'd be the luckiest bloke in the world."

"You never know. She might fancy you, too. But you're right--anyone would be lucky to be with Ruth." Harry hadn't noticed how close to him Ginny was flying.

"Oh, you think so?" she said coolly. "Since when do you think so highly of Ruth?"

Harry furrowed his brow. "She's one of your best friends. What's with you?"

Ginny pursed her lips and shot forward, saying tensely, "This way."

Harry checked his watch before he followed her; it had been half-an-hour since they'd left the castle, and they were still searching. He almost wished he'd just flown directly to the forest to look for the spiders, but he remembered what they had been like the last time he encountered them, and knew he'd done the right thing to pursue the issue in an organized manner. *Hopefully, the seventh-years won't need to come, he thought,*

just as a piercing scream rent the air.

"That's Hermione," he said with a certainty he hated. He didn't like knowing that at all. It meant nothing good. He swallowed even as he sped through the trees, Ginny and Tony keeping pace with him.

It took only five more minutes of following the noise and the giants' path to find the spiders. As he suspected, Hermione, Liam and Justin had found them first. Fridwulfa and Orst were there too, but they were the only giants. *Where are the others?* Harry wondered, but he didn't have time to ask them; each enormous person was working through the crowd of giant spiders. Fridwulfa and Orst were picking up the enormous arachnids and hurling them against centuries-old trees; Harry winced after he heard the first thud and *squish!* as the outer shell cracked and started oozing the inner organs of the creature. As unsavory a sight as that was, Fridwulfa's and Orst's methodology was effective--he only wished there were more of them.

Harry fired red sparks into the air, and in the eerie red light from this, he finally found out the reason for Hermione's screaming; she'd been knocked off her broom and was dangling by one hand from a very high tree branch, her fingers slipping off the branch one by one. Harry sped to her as fast as he could, but before he could reach her, she was falling, so he swooped down and let her fall across his broom, which made her cry out again because of the impact of her ribs on the wood. Harry wondered whether she might have broken some bones. Better than hitting the ground and being permanently broken, he thought.

He landed, about twenty feet from the nearest spider activity. He couldn't see Justin or Liam anywhere, and now he'd lost track of Ginny and Tony. It was so dark, and the spiders and trees were so dense, he wasn't sure how they'd fight these creatures who preferred the dark and who were familiar with this terrain, as it was their home. The brief burst of light from the red sparks had faded again. Unfortunately, the trees in the spiders' hollow were very dense and permitted almost no moonlight to penetrate to the forest floor.

He lit his wand so he could see her face, which was liberally scratched and bleeding in a half-dozen places from her fall through the tree branches.. "Are you all right?" She nodded, wincing a little; he had a feeling that if she weren't all right, she wouldn't own up to it. "Where are the others?"

"We found Wormtail and Snape and Malfoy. And--oh, Harry, you were right," she choked. "Viktor's with them. He's helping Wormtail. He pulled me off my broom and I was on his--he had his arm around my waist, and I managed to break his grip, but then I fell, and I must have tried to grab a dozen different branches of that tree before I caught one on the way down...." Now she pressed a hand to her side, not bothering to hide her

obvious pain. Harry wished he had time to be solicitous, but he didn't have that luxury. Viktor pulling her off her broom certainly explained the blood-curdling scream.

"Do you have any idea where your broom is?" She shook her head. He gazed at the dark beyond the small light produced by his wand. "Do you still have your wand?" She nodded, evidently mute from the pain now. He racked his brain--how had he and Ron gotten away from the spiders before?

The Flying Ford Anglia.

Now he remembered; the bright headlights of the car had split the blackness of the hollow where the spiders lurked, frightening the creatures and disorienting them so that they had released Harry and Ron and they had been able to get away. He turned to Hermione now. "Can you think of a spell to create a really bright light that'll last for a while? So we can see the spiders and also so they'll be disoriented?"

She thought for only a moment, then nodded. He grinned. "I knew you would. I'm going to try to get the others here. You create the light--as bright as you can. The spiders hate that."

Harry would never forget her scratched, determined face as he aimed his broom up toward the roof of the forest again. He could see the lit windows of the castle in the distance, deceptively comforting and homely. Above the trees, the full moon clearly showed him the location of the six waiting members of the Dueling Team, two of them heading toward him because they'd seen the sparks (Ruth and Susan), the others still hanging back, as he'd originally told them. He shouted to Ruth and Susan as they approached him, "Go on where you saw the sparks! I'm telling the others to follow you! Then I'm off to get the other reconnaissance team!"

They nodded as they passed him, and soon he had reached the other four club members and sent them hurtling after the first two. He headed southeast now, and just as he did, red sparks flew up into the air from that direction. Harry's heart was in his throat as he surged forward with an extra burst of speed, wondering fleetingly if any wizard had ever written paeans of praise for his broom. At this moment, Harry absolutely *loved* his Firebolt.

As he neared the location of the red sparks, Cho Chang suddenly burst up out of a clearing, jolting Harry. He came to a full stop, immediately suspicious.

"What's wrong?" he demanded to know, pulling out his wand so he would be ready for anything she might dish out.

She was sobbing and Harry saw that there was a vicious scratch on her right leg, which was partially exposed by a long rip in her robes. "It's--it's Davies. He's turned on us. He and Ron are down on the forest floor, dueling. I sent up the sparks and came up to make sure help would be coming--"

"Why didn't you help Ron?" he shouted at her, not caring that she was already very upset. "Then it would have been two against one!"

"I'm--I'm sorry Harry, I just couldn't. It's--it's *Evan!* He's in my house. He's a prefect...."

He glared at her suspiciously. "Is that the *real* reason? Or is it because you're Viktor Krum's girlfriend?"

Her distress seemed to increase. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Harry didn't feel like explaining. "You wait here. I'm going down there to help Ron." Still unsure of her allegiance, he didn't want to find himself in a two-against-two fight instead of two- or three- against one. "The others have all gone to help Hermione, Liam and Justin. Two of the giants are there as well. I don't know where the other giants have gone. Don't you go anywhere!"

He went down into the clearing from which she seemed to have emerged; he could see crackling red and amber and blue light emanating from Ron's and Evan's wands as they dueled. Both of their brooms were lying amidst the brush on the forest floor, but as Evan saw Harry descending in the silvery moonlight illuminating the clearing, he quickly leapt onto his broom and sped into the trees. Ron also leapt onto his broom, but before he could follow his attacker, Harry yelled, "No, Ron! We'll deal with him later. Right now we need to get to the others. We've found the spiders. I've got Cho waiting up above the trees. Did she--did she seem to be in on this with Davies?"

Ron shrugged. "No idea. She *did* leave me to manage on my own, but I think she was really shocked when Davies turned around and tried to hex me. Luckily, I was expecting something like that from her, so I just aimed back at a different person." Ron was holding his right arm across stomach as he sat on his hovering broom, his wand still clutched in his hand. His face was white with pain.

"Can you fly all right? Can you cope with more fighting?"

Ron nodded. "I'm right behind you."

They rose toward the forest roof again, finding Cho waiting for them. Without another word, Harry sped toward the spiders, just as a huge

explosion turned an ancient pine about a half-mile away into an enormous torch, the fire lighting up the night sky. Is *that* what Hermione had in mind? he wondered. If so, it was effective, and the light wouldn't need to be maintained by magic. He glanced at Ron and Cho, who looked more alarmed than ever. Harry tried to reassure them as they flew.

"I told Hermione to give us a source of bright light. Looks like she managed to do it." He tried to keep his voice from shaking. He didn't tell them that he and Ginny and Tony had taken the time to put out the giants' fire. That seemed silly now in the face of the inferno that Hermione had started. Trust Hermione to go overboard at a time like this....But he didn't say that aloud. He wanted them to think things were pretty much under control, that this was intentional. He wasn't sure himself that *anything* was under control, but he couldn't let the people he was leading--even his best friend--know that.

When they reached the living torch, they cut a wide berth around it, descending into the trees about twenty feet away. The fire illuminated the spiders' hollow almost as well as the car headlights had once done. Harry was met with the horrific sight of hundreds of enormous spiders retreating from the light. Fridwulfa and Orst looked completely overwhelmed. They were working their way through the crowd of spiders, destroying one after the other, but it was like removing sand from a beach with tweezers, and now the spiders were moving *toward* the giants, surging around them, ignoring the fact that heading toward the giants could mean death. They knew that being burned by the fire would mean death.

The spider holding Snape and Malfoy was prevented from moving by the ropes Ginny, Tony and Liam had conjured. The three of them hovered in the air around the monstrous thing while Hermione yelled instructions from the ground. They had to strain to keep their grips on the ropes. Parvati and Susan and Ernie and Justin were gamely trying to curse Wormtail and Krum, flitting about on their brooms higher up, but whenever Wormtail held up his silver arm in defense against the curses, the enchanted metal immediately deflected whatever it was, and Krum was so fast and agile on his broom, the curses zoomed past him without even coming close. Harry gasped as he heard Wormtail cry, "*Crucio!* but Susan swerved out of the way in time, although Parvati came dangerously close to being hit with it instead. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that neither of them had been hit by the curse; it would be impossible to stay on a broomstick and suffer the pain of the Cruciatus Curse at the same time.

Ron went to help with the spider holding Snape and Malfoy, while Harry, giving a blood-curdling cry, aimed for Krum with his Firebolt. He wanted to grab Krum's broom and force him to come down to the ground so he'd be helpless, out of his element. Harry remembered Krum's walk, the duck-footed gait. A killer whale is only a killer in the sea, he thought. Get it

beached, and he's at your mercy.

Krum had been dodging spells from Susan and Ernie and never saw him coming. The impact of the collision made Harry feel like his very bones were rattled out of place. Krum clung to his broom with determination, but now Harry was holding onto Krum's broom, too. He'd put his wand away so he'd have both hands free, one to hold his own broom and one for Krum's. Krum rapped on Harry's knuckles with his wand, trying to get him to let go. Harry wanted to scream from the pain, but instead, he tried to control where both brooms were going. Krum was glaring at him, his hawk nose very much like Snape's, somehow, in the flames from the burning tree. Then Krum aimed hot sparks from his wand at Harry's hand and forced him to release the broom. Harry did, with a yell of pain; there were black scorch marks across the back of his hand.

Harry looked up just in time to see the huge pine.

Thud! went Viktor Krum's body, into the thick tree trunk which he would have missed if Harry's hand had still been guiding his broom. He immediately fell off his broom and both the broom and Viktor Krum started hurtling separately toward the ground. Harry immediately went into a dive, clutching at the hooded cloak Krum wore. He couldn't believe his luck when it was actually in his grasp. But then, almost immediately, the hood was torn from the body of Krum's cloak with a dreadful loud *ripping*, and Krum was falling once more toward the ground. Harry threw down the useless scrap of fabric that was the hood and dove again, but he was too late this time, and Krum's body hit the forest floor with a sickening noise.

Harry zoomed down to land beside him. He went to his knees, his stomach turning over. "Viktor! Can you hear me? Viktor!" He'd fallen from at least a two-hundred feet onto a large flat rock thrusting up from the ground.

Krum's eyes were closed. Finally, they flickered open. "Harry?" he said in his distinctive accent.

"Viktor! Why--why have you done this?" Harry sobbed.

"Felt--so light--so happy--so carefree" the older boy intoned deliriously, his eyes rolling back in his head.

"Light? Happy? Viktor have you--have you been under Imperius?"

Krum opened his eyes again briefly. When he spoke, it sounded like he had pebbles in his mouth. "I do not know. Maybe. He--he is my grandfather. That must--that must make me like him. Right, Harry--?" His voice was getting softer, and there was a dark pain in his eyes that Harry didn't like.

"No, Viktor, it doesn't. It doesn't mean that at all. It's--" He practically choked, wishing Dumbledore were with them right now. "It's our choices that make us who we are, Viktor. You can be his grandson and still choose to be your own person."

Krum shook his head. "Not as--as strong as you, Harry. And--and now it is too late--"

"What do you mean? Of course it's not too late. Viktor? Viktor?"

The dark eyes stared, unseeing, into the intersecting tree branches above him. Harry shook him, then leaned down to listen to his heartbeat. There was none.

Harry felt the inexplicable urge to cry over this boy who had been a fellow Triwizard Champion (only two of the four were left, he realized with a shock) and whom he'd fixed up with Cho Chang, *his* first crush. (And now Viktor would be the second boyfriend she'd lost in two years.) Harry had seen him go down on his knees in agony when he'd received the Dark Mark (he knew what that was like now), and he'd seen him with his grandfather, torturing a caged lion for sport. In his other life he'd seen Krum's chest cut open and his heart removed by Voldemort, and Harry had dragged his body to the edge of the cliff where Lucius Malfoy and Barty Crouch, Jr. would later meet their deaths, and he'd thrown the body into the sea rather than let his corpse be cannibalized by his own grandfather, as well as the rest of the Death Eaters. And yet--Viktor Krum had done many horrible things in that other world at the behest of that grandfather. Who knew how many of the Death Eater attacks in the last eight months in *this* world had also included the heir of Voldemort? Did it matter whether he was acting under Imperius? He seemed to have a fatalistic view of what it meant to be Voldemort's grandson, as though his blood decided everything....

Harry looked down at the broken body, which had seemed so sturdy and indestructible. He must have broken his back when he fell, Harry thought, his throat tight. Well; better dead like this, he thought, than alive and in Voldemort's service, or dead by his own grandfather's hand and consumed, flesh and bone, by said grandfather in an effort to increase his power....Had he known what his grandfather might be planning to do with him? Did Voldemort even know what he could do with his heir, or had no one told him in this life? Harry wondered, shuddering.

He brushed his hand over Viktor's eyes to close them, remembering doing the same thing at Dover. He picked up his broom, scanning the eerily-lit hollow for Wormtail. *Him I need alive*, he thought grimly, sure that he would never forget Viktor's expression of helplessness as he lay dying, *He's--he's my grandfather. That must--that must make me like him.* To

find out you came from such a monster must surely give you doubts about whether you're a truly good person or just fooling yourself and others, Harry thought. It had clearly had this effect on Viktor Krum. And then there was Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius Malfoy....

Harry tried to push down the inexplicable grief he felt on Viktor's passing, and the doubts about Malfoy. He leapt onto his broom again, zooming upward to help those trying to subdue Wormtail. Still more curses were being deflected from the silver arm. They would never get him this way.

"Treat him like the spiders!" he suddenly cried to the others, as he conjured enchanted ropes from the end of his wand, lassoing the harried-looking wizard and yanking him off his broom, which fell uselessly to the forest floor. Harry braced himself for the extra weight that immediately caused him to sink down at least ten feet, the body dangling from the strong rope in his grasp. Wormtail's eyes bugged out. He didn't dare transfigure so high above the ground. Harry rose higher again, shouting to the others, "Stun him! Do it now! All of you!"

Four voices at once cried, "*Stupefy!*" and Harry felt the body suspended from the rope go stiff and still; now it was as though he was carrying a Peter Pettigrew-shaped log, perfectly frozen, his arms pinned to his side by the magical ropes. They would keep him like that so he couldn't transfigure.

The smoke from the burning tree was starting to irritate his lungs; his breathing came in painful gasps. The other Dueling Club members who had helped bring down Wormtail had smoky smudges on their faces now and were also gasping. Looking up, he saw that two more trees near the first one had also caught fire. The brightness of the flames was almost blinding now, and much brighter than the Ford Anglia's headlights had been. Swallowing, Harry realized that when all was said and done, they would also need to keep the rest of the forest from catching fire, contain it somehow. Why did the number of tasks before him seem to be *increasing* instead of *decreasing*?

He looked up now to see what had become of the other spiders and the giants; the bulk of the acromantula colony had evidently fled before the fire, and Orst and Fridwulfa had gone with them, for he still heard the distant *thud!* and *squish!* of the creatures hitting the trees. He wished he had some way of summoning the giants; it was *this* spider in particular they needed to subdue. If the others were fleeing, he couldn't care less.

He left Parvati and Justin to stand guard over Wormtail's statue-like body, trying not to be distracted by the thought that *Sirius could now be cleared*, while he and Ernie and Susan flew into the fray again. Harry called Susan to him and together they grabbed Severus Snape's arms while the others continued to try to control the spider with magical ropes.

They used the trapeze hold with him, grasping his forearms while he grasped theirs. At close range now, Harry was appalled to see how gaunt and wasted the Potions Master looked, and his grip was further compromised because of the bandages on his hands which were now clearly each missing the smallest finger.

"Hold on tight!" he told both Snape and Susan, grunting as he willed his broom to go higher still. It was no good; they weren't strong enough to pull up and get him out of the spider's grasp.

Wait, he thought. This is stupid. He remembered classes from when he was small, at the village school in Little Whinging. Classes about simple machines, about levers and ramps and pulleys....

Pulleys.

He conjured some more ropes and tied them around Snape's waist, two of them. It was difficult, as the spider was moving the entire time, and talking to them, which was really starting to annoy Harry. It spoke to him now. He'd almost forgotten the creatures could speak English.

"I have to eat, too," it said in a deep resonating voice, as though he were asking something perfectly reasonable. *"This wizard came and dropped these nice morsels of food in our midst. Very nice of him, I thought. Usually Hagrid feeds us, but he hasn't been to see us tonight. Where is Hagrid? Why has he not fed us? Has he sent this wizard with these men to eat? That must be it. Hagrid wishes us to eat the men. Go away and leave us alone. Let us enjoy our meal."*

Harry tried to shut his mind against the voice; it was worse than hypnotic, it was filling his brain, making it very nearly impossible to think of anything else. He tried to focus on his pulley idea and he summoned Mariah and Tony and Ginny and Ron, who saw immediately what he was up to. Mariah took his place slightly above Snape. Susan was already in position. They threw the ropes over Mariah's and Susan's brooms, and then Tony and Ginny pulled down on the rope looped over Susan's broom while Harry and Ron pulled down on the rope looped over Mariah's. Now they had enough force to pull him slowly up out of the spider's grasp. Mariah and Susan were making their brooms ascend the entire time, so the fact that the pulling was making them go back down meant that they each maintained a fairly steady altitude, and when they'd succeeded at last in extracting Snape from its grasp, it clicked its pincers at the empty air, grasping frantically for its lost quarry. The six of them couldn't help letting out victorious whoops and hollers; they moved him carefully down to the ground well away from the hollow and the burning trees, and Harry untied him and leaned down to speak to him.

"Are you--are you all right, Da--Professor?" He'd had to stop himself from

calling him 'Dad.'

The older man nodded, his dark eyes as haunted as Viktor Krum's had been. He'd been tortured for months. He was missing two fingers and he almost been killed by an acromantula. By comparison, he was indeed all right now. Harry ordered Mariah and Susan to stay with Snape while he, Tony, Ron and Ginny sped back to the monster to free Draco Malfoy using the same method.

But when they returned, they found that another spider had returned, unfazed by the bright light, perhaps also upset that Hagrid had not come to feed them, and thinking that the members of the Dueling Club would do nicely. It was going after the students controlling the spider that still held Malfoy, struggling to keep a grip on the ropes, and both Ron and Harry cried out, "No!" when they saw it coming after Hermione. She screamed and dropped her wand and rope, running before it, then stumbling and falling. She turned over and the thing loomed above her. Harry thought she must have twisted her ankle, or she'd be up and running again. He and Ron both swooped down to get her, but they weren't fast enough. The spider scooped her up and she let out a long, piercing scream, all the while struggling against the strong, hairy pincers. Now other spiders were returning; what had happened? Harry wondered. Were they used to the light now? Were there so many to manage that Orst and Fridwulfa hadn't noticed that some had evaded them? Or were they attracted to the heat of the fire? Did it remind them of their native Borneo?

Ron was flying around the spider frantically, its free pincers coming dangerously close to him. "Let her go!" he screamed at it, his face red with rage. "Take me! Take me instead!"

The acromantula answered, "*As you wish,*" and plucked him from his broom. His face was no longer red but ashen, and Hermione's screams escalated.

"Ron!" she cried. "Are you all right?" Tears rolled down her face. "I'm sorry!"

Ron continued to try to bargain with the thing, even as it started to move away with its double prize. "She's small!" he said, trying to convince it. "Hardly half a snack! I'm a lot bigger--don't waste your time with her!"

Harry was shocked; this was *Ron Weasley*, of all people, Ron who hated and feared spiders worse than anything else in the world. Ron who, for the second time in his life, was in the grasp of an acromantula. Ron who had willingly offered himself up in Hermione's place.

He wanted to fly to their aid, but he was already in the middle of the rescue-Draco-Malfoy operation, and without Ron to help, they needed

another pair of strong arms to pull it off. They'd started off needing to get two people away from a spider; now they had to rescue three people. Calculating quickly in his head, Harry was starting to despair of their task ever being done; if it took six of them to rescue every person who was captured by a spider, and the rescued person was incapacitated after that, their numbers would be dwindling very quickly and soon they wouldn't have enough people to execute the pulley-style rescues. And *that* was assuming no one else was captured, as Ron and Hermione had been.

Tony managed to grab Liam to take Ron's place, and Harry recruited Ruth and Millicent to fly high in the sky with the ropes slung over their brooms. After Ginny hovered near Draco, tying the ropes around his waist, she gave him a quick kiss, and then Harry, Ginny, Tony and Liam pulled down on the ropes while Ruth and Millicent kept their brooms at a steady height, and soon they had freed Draco Malfoy from the spider's grasp. The students on the ground tied the spider to a tree and went to conjure ropes to subdue the spider holding Ron and Hermione while the "rescue team" gently deposited Draco Malfoy on the ground near Snape. Ginny immediately fell on him, crying and laughing simultaneously, while the others returned to where Ron was still trying to convince the spider to free Hermione and concentrate on how delicious *he* was. This spider had moved close to where a fourth tree had ignited, sparks flying everywhere, and more and more, the sound Harry heard the most was human coughing as they all fought to breathe in the fiery, smoky atmosphere. It was like battling the beasts of hell in hell itself.

Harry didn't force Ginny to return with them; she and Draco Malfoy clutched each other convulsively, crying freely, while Snape, sitting nearby with Mariah and Susan, looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Then Harry wondered where Cho was, and found that she had discovered Krum's body and was huddled next to him, sobbing her eyes out. Harry was convinced that she had no idea what Viktor had been going through. And now he was dead.

Returning to the hollow, the spider was now securely tethered to a tree like its fellow, and Tony, Harry, Liam and Ernie managed to pull Hermione from the spider's grasp while Millicent and Ruth hovered above, the ropes slung over their broomsticks. Then they did the same for Ron, depositing him near Hermione, who fell on him much as Ginny had fallen on Draco Malfoy, clutching him to her. Harry caught his breath, seeing at last the raw passion she felt for him, the feelings she had denied on Ron's birthday when Harry had broken up with her--the feelings she'd been denying for perhaps a very long time. Was it to protect him that they'd still denied having these feelings on Ron's birthday? Was it her injured pride at his breaking up with her that had compelled her to turn on her heel and stalk away down the corridor?

Neither one of them seemed to care that anyone else in the world existed now. They knelt on the dirt of the forest floor, facing each other, arms wrapped around each other tightly. Tears were streaming down Hermione's face. Then she ran her fingers in wonder over Ron's features, shaking her head in wonder, speechless at first, and finally choking, "You--you hate spiders!"

Ron threw his head back, laughing uproariously. His face was smudged from the ashes flying from the fire and he had a gash along his jaw and several cuts on his arms bleeding freely. He cradled her face in his hands now, gazing at her with so much love it made Harry catch his breath.

"That's still true," he told her with a smile that looked like it went right to her heart. "But I love you more than I hate them, and I'm not willing to live without you any longer." He finally brought her face up to his and kissed her while she clutched at him, trying to get closer, opening her mouth under his and looking as though it would take an explosion of earth-shattering proportions to tear her from him.

Harry swallowed, feeling happy for them, but simultaneously feeling empty and utterly alone. He realized the others were standing around staring at him, wondering how he was going to react to this. "Um," he explained to them in a shaky voice; the smoke seemed to have cut his volume in half. "Did I--did I not mention that Hermione and I broke up last week?"

They looked uncertainly at the oblivious form that was Ron and Hermione combined, still kissing frantically. Then the two of them came up for air and noticed the others watching them. Hermione ducked her head bashfully, burying it in Ron's chest. She looked as embarrassed as when she'd inadvertently "flashed" Ron and Draco Malfoy and Ginny on the day of Dudley's funeral. His two best friends looked at Harry uncertainly and he forced himself to smile, although he felt a sudden stab of loneliness pierce him. They smiled back in relief, seeing only his façade, and then they sat down on the ground with their arms around each other.

He couldn't think about this right now, and he turned away from them, returning to Snape. Malfoy and Ginny were sitting next to each other in a pose similar to Ron and Hermione, their arms around each other, Ginny's head pillowied on his chest. When Harry sat down near them, Draco Malfoy looked at him with only a hint of resentment.

"Well, Potter," he said reluctantly. Harry saw Ginny nudge him in the ribs. "Thanks for saving my life," he blurted out suddenly, as though to get it over with.

Yeah, Harry wanted to say, Thanks for being a stupid prat and flying off to the forest alone. But instead he answered quietly, "You're welcome."

Malfoy looked around uncomfortably. "Um--if you don't mind, now I need to go, er--" he leaned over and whispered in Ginny's ear. She giggled.

"Oh, you. Just go behind a tree. There are only a million of them. Avoid giant spiders," she advised with a mischievous, loving look. He leaned down and kissed her quickly, then rose.

"You know," he said affectionately, "you're the only one I would let get away with that right now."

Grinning up at him, she said, "I know," with a merry look. He exited the clearing, walking a bit strangely, and Harry decided to ignore him and sit next to Ginny. He wasn't prepared for her throwing her arms around him and giving him a kiss on the cheek. Then they were both sitting back, staring at each other, and Harry's heart turned over, loving her so much, and feeling like she had never been more beyond his reach.

"I--I still can't believe you did all this. For *him*," she said, her meaning quite clear. He loved her and she loved Draco Malfoy, and he had just saved Draco Malfoy's life.

"Well, Ginny," he said, remembering another young man lying in a bed in the castle infirmary, his eyes full of love and longing as he gazed at Lily Evans; "if he had died, it would have made you sad."

He couldn't stop the tears flowing down his cheeks as he spoke, and he turned to see Severus Snape staring at him in amazement. Then Draco Malfoy returned from relieving himself and sat next to Ginny again. She snuggled against him once more, but she looked at Harry strangely now, frowning just a little, but also looking as though she were trying very hard to figure him out, and failing.

Harry rose and walked away from them. He needed to make sure the others were all right. Ernie and Millicent had come to sit near Snape along with Mariah (who still wore her fingerless gloves) and Susan. Tony and Ruth sat a little ways off, next to each other, but not touching. They looked like they were having a quiet conversation. Perhaps he's telling her how he feels, Harry thought, silently wishing him luck.

Liam had joined Justin and Parvati in watching over Wormtail; Harry couldn't help notice how solicitous Justin was being of Liam, who was coughing vociferously, his face almost black with soot. Finally, Liam pulled Justin to him in a tight embrace, burying his face in his neck, looking like he thought he might not make it, and reminding himself of what was important. Parvati turned discreetly away from them, giving them their moment. Harry smiled at her sadly; he didn't know whether she knew about Ron and Hermione, about fifty feet away, but she would soon. He

remembered now that all year, since September, she'd continued to look longingly toward Ron when she thought no one noticed. Perhaps she'd known the whole time they were together that he was in love with Hermione, and had thought she could eventually get him to change his mind and focus on her. But she had to draw the line at his saying Hermione's name when they were making love. That was too much. Parvati returned Harry's sad smile with one of her own. Parvati was all right, he thought. She'd fought as well and as hard as any of them, for all her dedication to Divination and Sybil Trelawney. She was a brave Gryffindor, an able warrior and still quite beautiful, even covered in soot.

When Justin and Liam had broken apart, he finally approached them. "We need to get Wormtail out of here before the spiders get him. Don't revive him. That's for the Ministry to do, in a nice, tight cell without any hope of escape."

They nodded and levitated the body, moving it into the trees and away from where the spiders were starting to congregate again. A sixth and seventh tree were burning now, and Harry held the hem of his robe up to his mouth to try to avoid inhaling too much smoke. He made his way to Cho in the haze. She was hunched over Viktor Krum's body, and she was very still. He pulled her up.

"Cho! We have to go! We'll bring Viktor's body, don't worry. But we can't stay here any longer. The forest is going up!"

He shook her and her head flopped around on her shoulders. He couldn't get her to open her eyes. Her breathing was barely detectable, as was her heartbeat. He slung her limp form over his shoulder and struggled to stand. She'd been breathing smoke for too long, sitting vigil so close to Viktor's body. Harry knew she wouldn't make it if she didn't get back to the castle soon.

Crucio!"

The pain hit him without warning. He sank to his knees, letting Cho's body fall to the ground; after what seemed an eternity of knives piercing his skin down to his very bones, and then the knives peeling back his skin and muscle layer by layer, he finally felt himself disconnect from his body and his eyes rolled back in his head as he found himself floating above it. Turning slowly, he saw who was torturing him now.

Evan Davies was not covered in soot, as the rest of them were. Harry remembered his brother Roger at the Death Eater meeting in his other life, and pursuing him at the football match in Fraserburgh. He recalled seeing the owl deliver the black-edged letter to Roger the year he was Head Boy. Had his brother Evan received one, too? Was Evan a Death Eater? Or was Roger the only true Death Eater in the family, and he'd put

Imperius on his brother to make him another agent of Voldemort at Hogwarts, like Blaise Zabini?

Whatever the reason, suddenly several things happened at once. A large spider stepped up behind Evan and suddenly picked him up in its pincers, then began calmly walking away with him. Evan's mouth was opened in a silent scream--at least, it was silent to Harry. Evan's wand dropped to the earth, and the slowly crackling beam of light that had connected him to Harry was broken. Before Harry could think about returning to his body, several things happened at once. Fridwulfa came striding into the hollow again, and Harry knew why humans feared the giants. There was a terrible look on her face; she picked up the spider and bashed it into the nearest tree to get it to give up its prize, not knowing Evan Davies had been putting the Cruciatus Curse on Harry. The pincers opened, and the spider lost its grip on Evan Davies, who went flying directly into one of the fiery trees.

But as Fridwulfa had returned to the hollow, a wave of flying things had swooped down into the hollow in slow motion like very large, lumbering bats, but after a moment, Harry was able to see that they were actually the seventh-year students, and he also saw that there was someone leading them who was *not* a seventh year, and hadn't been for a very long time.

It was Albus Dumbledore.

Harry slid back down into his body. The headmaster had seen Evan Davies being flung into the inferno, and as Harry regained his hearing, he thought that he had never heard a more horrible sound than the headmaster's simultaneously agonized and angry cry of, "NOOOOOO!" as he saw the young man, whom he did not know had turned on Harry, rise up, standing amid the flames, running around in agony as the heat cooked his body at an unspeakable temperature. Harry had to look away; it was a horrible way to die. Evan Davies was sixteen, like him.

But it was difficult to focus on the horror of Evan's death; loud *pops!* all over the place announced the elves' advent. Suddenly the little creatures were everywhere. A half-dozen elves surrounded Harry, and he asked them to move Cho Chang and Viktor Krum away from the fire. Then he shouted to Dumbledore, who was standing with a horrible expression on his face, watching Evan Davies, "Professor! Davies turned on us. He attacked Ron and flew off when they were supposed to be doing reconnaissance, and just before that spider attacked him, he'd put the Cruciatus Curse on me." Harry looked at the old man, who looked older still as he heard this news and watched Evan Davies die. When he had seen the headmaster, Harry had wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, in relief, but he looked at the old man's face and knew that rejoicing that the letter had been a ruse would have to wait.

Harry realized that Fridwulfa was gone again. Had Dumbledore seen what she'd done that had led to Davies' death? Would he tell Hagrid that his mother was a murderer?

Harry decided to focus on other things. "We're most of us all right," he shouted over the loud crackling of the flames. "The rest are farther along there, in the trees. We've got Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy, and Wormtail is stunned. Viktor Krum was helping Wormtail. He's dead--took a bad fall from his broom."

Dumbledore nodded sagely, but still looked shaken. "And as well-lit as this area is," he said nodding at the fire, "I think it's time for some containment." He sounded like he didn't want anyone or anything else dying as Evan had, regardless of what side the Ravenclaw prefect had been on. "You go along with the others and rest, while we get some help from the house-elves in creating a firebreak, so the flames can't travel farther than we want them to."

Harry nodded, following the elves levitating Cho and Viktor back toward the others. He could hear the headmaster, seventh-year students and elves farther off in the forest, magically pulling down trees and then setting fire to those growing at the edge of the firebreak. After letting them burn for a few minutes, they flew about, well above the flames, spraying them with water, until finally, the forest was more redolent of damp ashes than pinesmoke.

Trying to return his breathing to normal, Harry sat near Tony and Ruth, who were now leaning against each other companionably, exchanging small smiles every so often. The Dueling Club had done it. They had rescued Snape and Malfoy and apprehended Wormtail. And they'd only lost one of their number, the turncoat Evan Davies.

And Dumbledore was alive!

Harry tried to concentrate on this, swallowing as the headmaster walked toward him with a rueful smile on his face. He pulled Harry to his feet, then wouldn't let go of his hand. He seemed to be putting Evan Davies out of his mind for now.

"Well done, Harry, all of it. I'm very proud of you. When I'd returned to the castle, I found the students on the parapets, and they told me of your plan. Very well done." He nodded and smiled at Harry. Harry tried to smile feebly back, but just past the headmaster, he couldn't help but see Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley kissing. He looked back up into Albus Dumbledore's face.

"Thank you, sir," he said, his voice croaky. "Is--is everything all right at

the castle? The other teachers--?"

He nodded. "Ah, yes. Good instinct of yours, having the elves take care of that one. Mr. Zabini did *not* see *that* coming."

"What actually happened, sir? How did a few students overcome all of the teachers?"

He shrugged. "The teachers are basically good people, but they won't make that mistake again--and not just with Slytherins. They were each told that there was a Death Eater attack in the Slytherin common room, and they came. As soon as each one was admitted, they were stunned, one by one. Flitwick, evidently, they didn't bother with. They drugged his tea." It had looked to Harry like everyone was in the Slytherin common room; he hadn't noticed the absence of Flitwick's name. "Hagrid was the difficult one. They decided to tell him that someone in the house had a dragon's egg which had just hatched, and they needed his help. Well, Hagrid couldn't resist, of course." Someone certainly knew Hagrid's weakness for dragons, Harry thought. "And of course, this being the full moon, Remus is in the Shrieking Shack. It's a pity Sirius couldn't be with him, nor you, but obviously you were needed elsewhere." Dumbledore smiled at him, but Harry didn't smile back.

"Oh, no, Professor! Where did you say Professor Lupin is?"

"In the Shrieking Shack, of course."

"Is the Shack okay? And the rest of the village? How's Hogsmeade?"

Dumbledore looked confused. "Hogsmeade is fine, Harry. Why?"

Harry explained to him about the explosion and Dark Mark they'd seen earlier. Now the headmaster was tense and worried-looking again. "In *which* direction did you see the Mark in the sky?"

Harry could only point vaguely. It must have faded by now. Dumbledore's face blanched. "Oh, no...." he breathed softly.

"What?" Harry's voice shook.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry. I didn't hear a thing about there being trouble in Hogsmeade. But it does sound like--like the Shrieking Shack was attacked....And it's well away from most of the village. The people in Hogsmeade don't like it, so if it caught fire they'd probably just let it burn. It's too far away from other structures to endanger anyone else's house...."

Harry's legs seemed made of jelly. *If one more thing happens tonight....*

he thought, wondering how much more he could take. He swallowed with difficulty, then said, "There were flames. Shooting high into the air. And then the Mark."

They looked at each other, neither willing to acknowledge that Remus Lupin was probably dead. Dumbledore simply put his hand on Harry's shoulder with a sad frown pulling all of his features down, and Harry wished he could turn back the clock, not to change time, but just to keep himself from ever getting to this time, to avoid living this horror. Just when it seemed the only dead were Evan and Viktor, who were on the wrong side, and just as he found out that Albus Dumbledore was *not* dead, he learned that Remus....that Professor Lupin....

He turned away from Dumbledore, staring into the trees, his eyes feeling seared from the heat of the fire, too dry for him to cry. His tear ducts were completely depleted. "Time we all went back," he said tersely to the old man. Dumbledore patted his shoulder again and started gathering people together.

The elves were helping levitate many of the wounded and coughing members of the Dueling Club through the trees. Snape wanted to walk. He was already on his feet, staggering through the trees, when Dumbledore saw him and cried, "Severus!" He strode over to him and embraced him like a long-lost son, and Harry thought he actually saw a tear on the Potion Master's cheek as he withdrew. He nodded to Dumbledore, who left him alone after that uncharacteristic display.

They made an odd parade through the trees. Ron and Hermione also did not want help from the elves. Harry was right; Hermione had twisted her ankle when she'd been running from the spider, and Ron was carrying her now, which she was evidently enjoying (he didn't seem to mind a bit either). Draco Malfoy and Ginny walked together, arms around each other, just behind Professor Snape. Harry walked a dozen paces behind the two of them, trying not to stare, but it was very difficult.

After a while, he turned around, looking for Ron and Hermione. Ron was moving rather slowly while carrying her, and her head was pillowled on his chest. Harry couldn't help but remember when they'd first met Fridwulfa and Ron had scooped up Hermione in his arms effortlessly. Neither one of them seemed to notice that there was anyone else in the world. Hermione lifted her head and looked at Ron, making Harry catch his breath; it was that look of complete connection he'd never seen her direct at him. He *had* seen someone look at him that way, but only in his other life, when he'd been with Ginny. Ron returned the look, his eyes burning into hers as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. It looked like he'd only planned to make it the briefest of kisses, but Hermione clutched at his hair, refusing to let him go. Harry saw her open her mouth under his again, making Ron groan and grasp her more tightly.

Harry took a step closer to them and cleared his throat loudly. Ron pulled back from Hermione abruptly. She looked like she was about to protest, but Harry said, "Hermione! Ron! Come on. There'll be time for more of that later." He forced himself to smile at them. Ron looked abashed, then couldn't help his own smile creeping across his face. Hermione grinned up at him, and Harry turned to walk toward the others again.

"Come on," he said again, over his shoulder. "Without brooms this could take a while." The others had moved quite some distance ahead of him while he'd turned to talk to his best friends. Only Dumbledore--who was walking by choice--and the seventh-years still had their brooms. The brooms of the Dueling Club members seemed to have become lost in the confused battle with the spiders, or fallen into the fire. Harry realized suddenly that he would need to get another Firebolt, or a different broom, perhaps. Something new and improved. *That's what I need to do right now*, he thought, acutely aware of Draco Malfoy and Ginny in front of him and Ron and Hermione behind him. *Think about new brooms, state-of-the-art....*

Ron's footsteps seemed very loud behind him; glancing back, he saw that, while they'd left off kissing, they were still finding it impossible not to stare deliriously at each other. As a result, Ron wasn't too steady on his feet. Harry shook his head and turned back to the path. *I'm happy for them, I am*. He knew it was not Hermione he was longing for, but what she and Ron had together. He wanted that with *someone*. As he looked at Ginny ahead of him, he amended that. *All right; not just anyone....*

After a few minutes, the others were in sight before him again. He saw Snape turn and look at Harry, Ron and Hermione, his eyes widening in surprise. Harry assumed he was unprepared for the clear, unmistakable looks of ardor on their faces, since it was Harry who'd been her boyfriend back in August, when the Potions Master had been captured. But then, in the wand light, Harry could see that Snape's expression was clearly one of horror, a worse look on his face than Harry had ever seen. He looked deathly pale even for Severus Snape.

Then Harry felt it. Even as Snape was crying out, "NOOOO--!" just as Dumbledore had done when he'd seen Evan in the fire, the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up and he heard the urgent footsteps pounding on the dry dirt path, heard the low rumbling growl. He turned just in time to see the wolf's red eyes as it leaped onto Ron Weasley's back and sank its teeth into his shoulder.

Ron's scream was earth-shattering and horrible. He fell to his knees, on top of Hermione, deliberately placing himself between her and the wolf even as he was clearly in unspeakable pain. The slavering mouth moved to Ron's left upper arm as Harry executed the change and hit the ground

with all four paws running. Though he knew his transfiguration had only taken seconds, it seemed to be an eternity. His best friends had just admitted their love for one another at last, and now one of them was about to be killed.

Not if I have anything to do with it, Harry thought fiercely, as he leapt at the wolf, sinking his own teeth into its neck, making it release Ron's arm. He remembered feeling almost petrified with fear at the thought of being mauled by a wild animal, when he and Hermione had been in the Pensieve. Now he was doing some mauling himself. The two animals tumbled off Ron and Hermione, locked together, blood flowing liberally--Ron's and the wolf's--as they rolled over and over on the ground, banging into tree trunks and lumpy, ancient roots.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ron lying on top of Hermione still, his arm a bloody mess, and Harry renewed his efforts to punish the wolf for what it had done. But in the moment when he'd turned to see his best friends, the wolf managed to get away from him. He immediately sprang after the beast. The two of them pounded through the forest, which had become a blur; Harry's griffin eyes had no problem seeing the wolf in the darkness, nor keeping track of it, as he had with Wormtail the previous year. He and the wolf were of much the same size, and it couldn't go places that were inaccessible to Harry, as the small rat had been able to.

Harry didn't know for how long they ran. He tried not to think about how tired he was as he pushed himself to keep on. He had to make sure the wolf stayed in the forest. He couldn't risk it getting to any of the Muggle villages near the Clash.

They both slowed down a little at a time. Finally, the wolf collapsed into an exhausted heap on the forest floor. Harry let himself collapse too, a few feet a way, continuing to watch the wolf cautiously, should this prove to be a ruse. But the wolf put his snout down on his paws and closed his eyes, giving in to his exhaustion at last. Harry fought the urge to close his own eyes; he had to keep watch. He noticed in the moonlight that the wolf's grey fur was charred and singed along his right flank, and that his ears also looked singed. Perhaps he'd been too close to the fire at some point.

Keeping watch was difficult. His heavy eyelids kept wanting to droop...

He was standing in the doorway of a classroom. He could tell that he was not at Hogwarts. It wasn't like the classrooms in the village school in Little Whinging, either, which were in a building that had been smart and new forty years earlier, but now was smudged and grimy, rows of metal lockers in the corridors dented and covered in too many layers of paint to cover up graffiti that rarely occurred, dropped ceilings with flickering fluorescent tubes in the classrooms always missing a

few tiles, so that daydreaming students like Harry could gaze up at the heating ducts or insulation-covered plumbing when they grew bored.

No, this classroom looked more like something from a period film, as far as Harry was concerned. The blackboard was trimmed out in dark heavily-carved wood and the desks were bolted to the oft-waxed floor; crudely-drawn pictures of people in wizarding cloaks and hats covered one wall, and above these works of art was the legend, "Our Families." Family pets depicted included some rather exotic birds and a couple of snakes, in addition to the requisite owls and cats.

Latin declensions covered the blackboard:

	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Nominative	os	ora	corpus	corpora
Accusative	os	ora	corpus	corpora
Genative	oris	orum	corporis	corporum
Dative	ori	oribus	corpori	corporibus
Ablative	ore	oribus	corpore	corporibus

The children who belonged to this classroom did not appear to be the eldest in the school; they seemed to be around eight or nine years of age, from what Harry could tell. They sat at the desks in small versions of the adult wizarding robes depicted in the lively drawings and recited the Latin with a seriousness that was threatening to make him burst out in extremely inappropriate laughter. Then Harry looked up and saw the teacher, pointing at the words with her wand as the children read: it was Alicia! Harry smiled at her from the doorway, and she stopped and smiled at him.

"Children! We'll go on with this in tomorrow's lesson. Mr. Potter is here now, as promised, for today's story-time. Please give him your complete attention."

Harry walked forward, and near the desk, Alicia handed him the book with the story he was to read to the children; she said to him quietly, "Thank you so much for coming, Harry. Thank goodness Dumbledore and McGonagall gave you permission. The children are incredibly restless now that spring's here. It's all I can do to keep from running outdoors and rolling about on the grass myself..."

But that gave him an idea. "Why not do just that?"

She frowned at him. "What?"

He turned to the children. "How would you all like to have story-time out-of-doors today?"

The children smiled back at him eagerly, and Alicia looked at him skeptically, one eyebrow raised, then reluctantly nodded at him, and he admired the way she lined the children up like little marching soldiers. In front of the heavily-timbered building across the High Street from the village hall there was a curved drive like the one at Hog's End, so that the school bus could load and unload children without blocking the street. Nestled in the curve of the drive was a small park with neatly-manicured grass and flowering trees and buds just beginning to emerge from the ground. Harry led the lines of children into the middle of the grass and they all sat down around him. He was in a sea of children, terribly squirmy and excited because HARRY POTTER was going to read them a story today!

Harry made himself comfortable on the grass and opened the book Alicia had handed him, beginning, "Once upon a time there was a beautiful maiden..."

As he read the tale of the unfortunate girl whose father lied and claimed she could spin straw into gold, and the prince who forced her to do just that, he was frequently interrupted by questions from the children.

"Was the little man really a little man, or was he a house-elf?" said a shy little girl with dark shining hair.

"I think he was a house-elf who tricked his master into giving him clothes," said a boy with sandy hair and a scaly scab on his chin.

"But house-elves can't spin straw into gold!," said another girl authoritatively. "It had to be a really small wizard."

"Could have been a lepper kon," said a boy with no front teeth.

"But then the prince's gold'd be gone the next day."

"Maybe he put it away in a vault and didn't notice."

"Children--" Alicia said with a clear warning in her voice. They settled down to listen again. When Harry reached the part about the poor girl having to guess the name of the person

who had helped her or give up her child, the children gasped, even though they also gave the distinct impression that they'd heard the story many times.

When Harry said, "The end," his audience erupted in appreciative applause. Then suddenly, with a loud BANG! a yellow school bus appeared in the drive.

"Back inside, children! You need to pack your bags. Don't forget your currency assignment. If I say to you, What is another way you can express four-thousand, six-hundred thirty-eight Knuts? I want you to immediately say--"

"Nine Galleons, six Sickles and twenty-seven Knuts," a few students answered in unison, while others attempted to mumble along as if they knew.

A little girl with light brown hair and intelligent dark-blue eyes said knowingly, "That one's easy. There are four-hundred ninety-three Knuts in one Galleon, so it's going to be less than ten Galleons because it's short of four-thousand nine-hundred thirty Knuts..."

Harry's head was swimming. He'd prided himself upon at least being rather good at mathematics in school (he'd even bragged about this to Hagrid when they met, since Hagrid as much as implied that Harry hadn't been taught anything of use), but he'd never had to memorize products of twenty-nine and seventeen.

--so you take four-hundred ninety-three away from four-thousand nine-hundred thirty," the girl continued to whomever would listen. Harry smiled; she would be a terror at Hogwarts one day. Probably already planning to be Head Girl, as her teacher had been.

--and you get four-thousand four-hundred thirty-seven. Which is just two-hundred and one short of the original number. And it's easy from there to figure out that there are six twenty-nines in two-hundred and one with twenty-seven Knuts left," she finished triumphantly. Her face fell momentarily when she saw that no one was paying attention to her, but then it lit up rapturously when she saw Harry smiling at her, followed by her turning a bright crimson and scurrying into the school with the other children.

Harry followed the children back into the school, wandering up and down the corridors looking at artwork and essays on

parchment that had been posted outside various classrooms. In every room, the children were busily packing their rucksacks, and soon, they were swarming out the front doors of the school and piling into the bus, to be taken wherever they lived in England, Scotland or Wales. When it was fully loaded, the bus disappeared with another loud BANG! and Harry wandered back to Alicia's classroom to say good-bye. It had actually been a rather pleasant way to spend the latter part of the afternoon. He'd managed to get permission on a day when he would otherwise be in the Potions dungeon, and he wasn't sorry not to see Professor MacDermid or Pansy Parkinson until the next Potions class. He hadn't been allowed to come by himself, however, for security reasons. The headmaster himself had flown with him to the village, and then he'd gone on to have a drink with a friend at the Three Broomsticks, which had been rebuilt after the explosion on the day of the ceilidh.

When Harry reached the classroom, he heard low voices, and realized that someone else had come to see Alicia. She seemed to have thought he'd left already. Then--there was no mistaking it. Alicia was moaning and a male voice was saying, "Let's continue this at my flat." Harry dared to peek around the doorway just as they Apparated out of the classroom, arms around each other. He hadn't been able to see who Alicia's boyfriend was.

"'Arry?" a heavily-accented voice said behind him. Harry whirled, surprised to see Fleur Delacour standing there, looking as flawless as ever, even though, like Alicia, she spent her days teaching children. She leaned forward and kissed him quickly on each cheek. "'Ow are you doing?" she asked with a brilliant smile.

"Oh, er, fine. I'm just fine. I was just doing story-time for Alicia's class."

Fleur looked distinctly unhappy about that; her mouth twisted, and it was the first time Harry ever thought of her as ugly. She bore a striking resemblance to the rampaging veela at the Quidditch World Cup, who had suddenly become so frightening after being so irresistible....

"Alicia." Fleur said the name as though it were an obscenity. Harry swallowed, not knowing what to say. But then he could see that Fleur made an effort to brighten. She smiled--although it looked forced, and said, "'Ave you seen Roger Davies? The 'eadmistress said she saw 'eem entair a leetle

while ago. I thought pairhaps 'e was planning to surprise me."

So, Harry thought. Fleur and Roger are still seeing each other. Wait, he thought--the man with Alicia--

He thought about what Roger Davies would probably look like from the back, and realized that was probably the person who had been in Alicia's classroom with her, just before they Apparated away--

"Are--are you sure she saw Roger? Maybe she made a mistake. Did you--did you plan to meet here today?"

"No, no--that is why I said 'e might 'ave been planning to surprise me." She looked suspiciously at Harry, who tried to look as innocent as possible. Harry prayed desperately for Dumbledore to appear. Amazingly, he looked up, and there was the headmaster in the doorway to the school. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ah, Harry! There you are. How did it go?"

"Fine, Professor."

"Madamoiselle Delacour. A delight, as always."

She nodded and smiled at the Hogwarts headmaster. Harry was very glad when they were able to get away and retrieve their brooms from the anteroom near the front door. As they rode back to Hogwarts, Dumbledore made small talk about teaching small children (apparently, he had done a stint himself in the village school just after he'd finished at Hogwarts), but all Harry could think about was the inadvisability of cheating on a girlfriend who was part veela...

Was that a dream or a memory? he wondered. He decided it had been another memory; it was too vivid for a dream, it had too many small, clear details. During the time since he'd restored the timeline, he seemed most prone to having memories come over him unexpectedly when he was just falling asleep or just waking.

Harry wasn't sure how much time had passed, but a faint glow started to appear in the sky above the trees and birdsong began to twitter here and there. He opened his eyes in surprise, remembering that he hadn't intended to close them, but he saw before him not the sleeping form of the grey wolf, but a thin wizard in tattered, singed and bloodied robes, snoring softly. There was also a great deal of blood on his neck and face and around his mouth, and a wound on his neck that was healing rapidly, even as Harry stared at it. The hair on the top of his head also looked

singed.

Harry changed back into his human form again, immediately yawning and stretching. He felt like he could sleep for a month. And yet, he dared not. There was still a lethifold loose somewhere in the forest. Even though it was morning, it wouldn't do for both of them to be asleep if it came upon them.

Finally, the man stirred and lifted his head cautiously, staring at Harry, who sat with his arms around his legs, clutching them to his chest.

"Good morning, Professor."

* * * *

If someone had asked Harry twenty-four hours earlier where he would be having breakfast this morning, the answer would *not* have been "at the pub known as *The Clash* in the village of Gartley, Aberdeenshire." After Harry had said, 'Good morning,' to his professor, the older man had broken down in a crying fit, tearing at his ragged robes, demanding to know whose blood was on him, wanting Harry to tell him what he'd done. Harry had forgotten that he couldn't remember anything from his werewolf nights except when he had the Wolfsbane Potion; the potion helped him retain some of his human thought processes. Without it, he was like a person with split-personality disorder who remembered nothing of the actions of an alternate personality. Harry had been shocked and dismayed; adults weren't supposed to *cry*, certainly not professors. He had been furious the night before, wanting to kill the wolf (but lacking the silver to do it). He had suspected that he would awake to find a man in the morning, rather than a wolf, but he had been torn between wanting it to be Lupin (because it would mean he had escaped the Shrieking Shack) and not wanting it to be Lupin (because that would mean someone else was responsible for attacking Ron).

Ron.

Oh, god, Harry thought.

He bit Ron.

Feeling incredibly dim, Harry understood the tears and self-recrimination then. How horrible. That would mean that Ron was now--

Oh, god, he thought again.

Harry had swallowed, looking at the distressed man before him, who had tried almost his entire life to avoid just such an event occurring. If Harry had had to describe his basic nature during the other twenty-six or so

days and nights of the month, he would say that Lupin was the soul of kindness and would never hurt anyone except to defend himself or someone else. And now he had done this, to Harry's best friend....

Harry had broken through his sobbing to ask him whether he had any Muggle money with him. He looked up in surprise, saying that he did, for just such an emergency (he wanted to think he knew where he would wake on the mornings after the full moon, but he felt safer taking precautions). Harry transfigured their clothing so it would look less conspicuous to Muggles and used his wand to determine which direction was east. They'd walked through the forest, soon reaching the edge of the trees and the village of Gartley. (Harry was glad they hadn't drawn closer to the village.) They passed several large gardens in the rear of some imposing houses, continuing to walk within the confines of the trees, before they came to a large meadow, and then just beyond that, Harry recognized the pub where he'd seen Dumbledore with the bloodhound in his other life.

Now they were sitting in a cozy booth in the Clash, speaking in low voices while the publican served up pots of tea for them and for a young honeymooning couple who had taken a room for the night (he heard them saying they were driving up to Inverness). Harry's stomach responded immediately when the smell of eggs and sausages cooking wafted from the kitchen behind the bar.

Lupin looked at him helplessly. Harry had tried to help him make his hair look less like it had been held to a candle, but it hadn't worked very well. He looked awful. His eyes stared into Harry's from sunken sockets, a haunted expression there that broke Harry's heart. He recalled Cedric and Dudley; he knew how easy it was to wallow in guilt. And he hadn't personally put the Killing Curse on Cedric, or put Imperius on Dudley and made him jump to his death. Lupin had personally attacked Ron and changed him forever.

Harry cast about for something helpful to say, but all that came out was, "We heard the explosion from the Shrieking Shack in the forest and went up above the trees to see what it was."

Lupin nodded. "I had gone there after classes were over. I was waiting for Sirius, but then the headmaster's phoenix came to me with a note saying that Sirius was indisposed, and did I mind coping by myself just this once?" He sighed. "I thought of coming to get you, for you to transfigure yourself and keep me company, but frankly, the last time you did that I felt a bit like I was imposing, so I just settled down to wait. Ever since--well, ever since the incident three years ago I've erred on the side of caution, trying to sequester myself good and early. It was going to be one of those strange nights, too, like when we were in the Shrieking Shack with Peter and I hadn't transformed even though it was after moonrise...."

Harry furrowed his brow. "Oh, right. Why *did* that happen?"

Lupin sighed. "The full or nearly-full moon rises about the time the sun sets. Right now that's about seven-thirty. But when the moon becomes truly full--when the earth and moon move in their orbits so that the earth is fully exposed to the side of the moon on which the sun shines--that might be any time before or after moonrise. Three years ago on that night it was a good hour-and-a-half later, just when we had come out of the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow and were on our way back to the castle. I knew it would be happening soon, but unfortunately, I must have lost my watch inside the tunnel. I would have stayed in the shack had I realized I was so close to my change. I thought it was earlier in the evening...." He sighed deeply again. "Last night it was only about forty-five minutes after moonrise that the moon and earth moved into position so that the moon became officially full. However, fifteen minutes before that--"

"Death Eaters attacked."

He nodded, taking a sip of tea. "They attacked the shack. Very specifically. It was intentional." He put his teacup down and made a tent of his fingers. "We can't avoid facing it any longer, Harry. We have a double-agent in the operatives, and we have to find out who it is. We've been going on wild-goose chases and following red-herrings for two years now. Only an operative would have known to attack the Shrieking Shack last night, just before the moon became full."

"Why did they do it that way? Because you can't be killed in your werewolf form without someone using silver?"

Lupin frowned at him. "Is Hermione the only one who did proper research when Snape assigned that werewolf essay? I can't be killed except with silver or by beheading in my human form either, Harry. No, the person or people who attacked the shack wanted me to flee, and they knew where I would go while I was in my human form in order to try to avoid endangering others: the forest."

Harry nodded. "Except that they knew that a whole slew of us were planning to go into the forest to try to rescue Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy."

"Right."

They were silent, staring into their teacups. A few minutes later, the publican made them jump when he arrived with their heaping plates of food. Harry started to tuck in enthusiastically, feeling ravenous after the events of the previous night, but when he saw Lupin staring listlessly at

the mounds of egg and sausage, he slowed down, tucking a piece of sausage into his cheek so he could ask, "Aren't you going to eat anything?"

Lupin looked up at him with a truculent expression. "Why? You think it makes any difference if I fill my belly while I'm still in my human form? You think it makes me less of an animal when the full moon is in the sky? Because I can tell you now--I've tried everything, and none of it has any effect on me. None. The only thing that works is Wolfsbane Potion."

Harry smiled brightly at him. "Well, some good news is in order then. We managed to get Snape back. So when we return to the castle, he should be able to make you some potion to take tonight."

"And the person I attacked."

"Pardon?" Harry said indistinctly, with his mouth full of eggs.

"The person I attacked will need it too. He'll change tonight. Or she will." He still looked very somber. "Harry. Tell me who it was. I--I didn't kill them, did I?"

Harry shook his head, putting his fork down. "I'm almost completely certain you didn't. I saw it--you--bite his shoulder, and then his left upper arm...."

"Who?"

Harry swallowed, thinking again of what his best friend would be going through for the rest of his life....

"Ron."

"What?"

Harry nodded sadly. Lupin covered his face with his hands again and his shoulders shook with sobbing. Harry noticed the publican giving a curious look in their direction as he stood behind the bar polishing glasses.

Harry stared down at his plate, wondering what to do, what to say to make things better. And yet--this man had attacked and changed his best friend forever. He'd turned Ron into a monster like him.

But this "monster" had also been one of his father's best friends, a friend for whom he'd learned the Animagus transfiguration, a friend whose secret he kept for seven years, and a friend whom he wanted to prevent becoming a murderer. If James Potter hadn't pulled Severus Snape out of the tunnel leading to the Shrieking Shack, Lupin would have been going

through this at the age of sixteen. His father had stood by Remus Lupin, and so would he. And he would stand by Ron Weasley as well.

"Did you--did you know who bit *you*?" Harry asked him softly. Lupin raised his eyes to Harry.

"No. I was young. I've never known any other werewolves, nor wanted to."

"Well," Harry continued, "Ron's lucky then. I mean, he'd obviously rather not be a werewolf--no offense--"

Lupin actually snorted in laughter; Harry was glad to hear it. "None taken, of course."

--but at least he has someone he can talk to about it. You can warn him about all of the things that will happen to him. Explain about the cycles of the moon and all, so he knows when everything is going to happen, like you do. He has someone who *knows*."

Lupin grimaced and put a sausage into his mouth, chewing it savagely and then swallowing. "Yes," he said as though he detested himself. "He has someone who knows because *I* made him like *me*."

"That wasn't your fault! Normally you *could* assume that you wouldn't be endangering any humans to go into the forest. You were already doing everything in your power to keep yourself from other people by going into the Shrieking Shack. You were set up. We all were. You made every effort to do the right thing. And plus, Wormtail had Snape, who could have been making Wolfsbane Potion for you all these months if he hadn't been taken prisoner. That's probably why the board of governors reckoned it would be safe to have you back, right? Because Snape could make you the potion?"

He nodded miserably. "And I think we know that there are people on the board who are being influenced by the Death Eaters. What with the ban on Muggle-born students they're discussing..."

"They are?" Harry immediately cried. "They can't do that! I *know!* It would be a *disaster*--"

"I don't think it would be a good idea, but why do *you* feel so strongly about it?"

Harry bit his tongue at first, but then he couldn't help himself, and his words started tumbling over themselves. "Well--well look at Hermione. If there had already been a ban on Muggle-borns before she came to Hogwarts, the wizarding world would be missing out on the most brilliant witch to come here in ages. And last year the Head Girl was another

Muggle-born, Alicia Spinnet. And my mum was a Muggle-born. They can't ban Muggle-borns, they just *can't*. If we let them do that, the next thing you know, the Squibs will all disappear, and there'll be a labor shortage in the wizarding world, and the Ministry will be so busy monitoring accidental magic by Muggle-borns the Death Eaters will take over, and you and Ron will be sent to the mountains to live in werewolf relocation camps, which, let's face it, are just glorified prisons...."

"Harry!" Lupin shouted, then dropped his voice, clearly having not intended to speak so loudly. "What are you on about? You're babbling."

Harry looked up in surprise, stopping in mid-rant. He swallowed a gulp of tea. "Oh. Sorry."

He stared at his food, suddenly not feeling very hungry. Lupin had started to eat again, though, and Harry even thought he might be looking a bit like his old self. "What exactly happened in the forest, Harry?"

Harry gave him the short version, saying that Viktor Krum was Voldemort's heir, and he'd died from a bad fall; they'd captured Wormtail, and then freed Snape and Malfoy. Lupin was grinning now.

"Really? You really have Peter?"

"As far as I know." Harry felt a happiness bubbling up in him, too, and he grinned. "Sirius will be cleared. He can finally stop running."

Lupin was really shoveling the food in now, looking cheered. "He can finally go home and see his family," he said between bites. "And they can hold up their heads again. You know what it's been like for them, everyone in the wizarding world thinking they have a murderer in the family?"

Harry frowned. "Sirius has a family? Do he and his wife have kids?"

Lupin snorted. "Wife? No, I didn't mean that kind of family. He was only twenty-one when he went to prison, Harry. Lily and James had met in school, so they were already settled down at that age, but I doubt whether Sirius would be married today even if he *hadn't* been in prison for twelve years and on the run for four. No, Sirius has two older sisters, and his parents are still alive as well. The sisters are married and one of them has kids--I think the other one didn't want any. Cass was always--"

"Who?"

"Well, actually, her name is Cassiopeia. She's the oldest. Very, very bossy. A good ten years older than Sirius. And then there's Ursula--she's the one with the children. Two boys and a girl, if I recall correctly. The

older boy's supposed to start at Hogwarts next year, I think. Sirius has never even met them--they were all born after he went to Azkaban. I've kept in touch with Sirius' mum, Callisto. She sent me announcements when her grandchildren were born, and every so often I get pictures, too. I've been able to share them with Sirius since he escaped, so at least he's seen images of his nephews and niece, even though he hasn't met them yet. I think Ursula's done having kids. Callisto implied it when she sent the announcement of Mercy's birth..."

Harry smiled. "That's a nice name."

Lupin laughed. "Guess what it's short for?"

Harry blinked. "I didn't know it was short for anything. Isn't it just one of those virtue names, like Faith and Hope and Prudence?"

"Usually. *This* one is short for 'Mercedes.'"

"Oh."

"Don't ask."

"Well--it's kind of hard not to...."

Lupin smiled. "Ursula is seven years older than Sirius. Both of his sisters were out of school when he started, and they'd both been in Ravenclaw. Very studious, very clever. Ursula married a Muggle-born wizard from Hufflepuff, Alan Pierson. He and Ursula had already had Orion and Leo, and they thought they were done when they discovered Ursula was expecting again....Alan never got over his fondness for cars, even though he knew he was a wizard from the age of eleven and there was no place to keep a car at the castle, but he'd evidently labored under the delusion he would get himself a Mercedes when he could afford it. Well, when the baby was born, he got his Mercedes, but it was a little girl, not a car," he grinned. "Of course, according to Callisto, he fell in love with that baby girl at first sight and hasn't talked since about getting a car of any kind."

Harry smiled. He couldn't wait for Sirius to get to meet his sister's children. Then he noticed something else Lupin had said.

"No place to keep a car at the castle? Is that what you said?"

"Right. The Blacks live in Ascog Castle, on the Isle of Bute, in the Firth of Clyde. Oh, the history books all say it was destroyed in the Campbell-Lamont skirmishes of the seventeenth century, but it's been in the hands of the Black sept of the Lamont clan since the early part of the eighteenth century. Muggle-repelling charms and illusion charms make it appear to be a ruin to non-magical people. There's a cottage on the estate that people know is a private home, but it's really little more than a glorified

entrance hall. It's the way into Ascog; there's a long underground passage connecting it to the castle proper. I loved going there to visit when I was a boy. We timed my summer visits so I wouldn't have any trouble with the moon. But, of course, once Sirius could transfigure himself to accompany me, that was less of a worry. And if James was also visiting, the three of us could go out together on the beach at night and the moon be damned."

Harry's mind was still reeling. "Sirius grew up in a *castle*? On an island?"

Lupin nodded. "Perhaps he'll have us all for a visit once his legal problems are cleaned up. You'll like Callisto. And Sirius' dad, Walter. Ursula's not bad, either. She and Hermione would probably get along well. Cass, on the other hand--"

"What?"

Lupin frowned. "No one ever got on well with Cass. It's beyond me how she found a husband. He's a Slytherin too, no less. And just as disagreeable as her. Well. So maybe it's not beyond me--probably no one else could stand either one of them."

"Really? What's his name?"

"Something simple. Johnson. Jones. Smith. Something like that. I don't remember right now. I try to think about Cass and her husband as little as possible. I think his first name is Floyd. Oh, wait! His name is Floyd Jones. That's it. I think he works for the Ministry, but he's one of those close-mouthed types, and I don't tend to go prying into others' business, especially if I'm not too fond of them to begin with. It makes them less likely to go prying into mine."

Harry nodded and they ate the rest of their breakfast in silence. After their plates had been cleared, they paid the bill and left, the publican looking at them strangely. They looked about to make sure no one was observing them going into the forest, then slipped into the trees and waiting to come upon a clearing. Harry looked up at the break in the trees, judging whether it was big enough to give him enough room for an ascent. Lupin frowned.

"What are you doing, Harry?"

"Well--I thought I'd fly us back. You don't look all that heavy. If I can carry Draco Malfoy, I can carry you."

Lupin frowned. "You've flown with Draco Malfoy riding you?"

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it very quickly. *Yes, we practically flew all the way from Edinburgh to Manchester.... Except that was in*

another life. "Er," he said, stalling. "I said 'if.' I mean, he's not that big, so I reckon I *could* carry him. And you're a little smaller, so you shouldn't be a problem."

Lupin looked up at the sky. "It's broad daylight, Harry."

"We're well away from Muggles now."

"I wasn't thinking of Muggles. Anyone looking out a castle window when we're coming back will see you."

Harry thought about this. "Perhaps I shouldn't wait any longer to register with the Ministry. I know Dumbledore and McGonagall said I could wait, but at this point--I'm not sure what the point would be."

"Voldemort will know, if you do that."

Harry grimaced. "He already knows. Or at least, he knows I'm an Animagus. He thinks I'm a lion, because that's what Wormtail told him."

"Well, if you register, your true form will be legally recorded, and he'll know you're not a lion."

Harry swallowed. "That's true. Maybe--maybe we'll just fly part of the distance, then walk back the rest of the way?"

Lupin nodded. "Probably wise. Don't show your hand until it's absolutely necessary, Harry, if you can help it. You know something they don't. Exploit every advantage you can. You didn't transfigure yourself during the battle, did you?"

"No. Only afterward, when you--" He stopped short of saying *when you attacked Ron*. "You know. But I didn't spread my wings, so even if anyone saw that who didn't already know I'm an Animagus, they'd think I'm a lion."

The brief transfiguration spell Harry had put on Lupin's hair and clothes wore off, and he was once again wearing charred and ragged and bloody garments. The older man looked down ruefully at his attire, reminded again of what he'd done the previous night. "Speaking of transfiguration...." he said, grimacing.

Harry put his hand on his shoulder; it was so strange, being taller than this man who was one of the best teachers he'd ever had, to whom he'd looked up when he was in third year (literally and figuratively). "Do you want me to be there when you and Ron talk?"

Lupin looked thoughtful. "I don't know yet. I'm still trying to formulate

what I need to say. There are so many complicated issues to being a werewolf. I mean, life as a wizard is never really simple. Life as a wizard who is also a werewolf--well, the complications don't just double, they increase exponentially...."

Plus, Harry thought, there was the fact that it was *Ron*. The situation couldn't be much worse, he thought, if Ron were somehow turned into a house-elf. Or a giant. He remembered Ron's reaction to discovering that Lupin was a werewolf, when they were in third year. Now he was a creature he loathed and feared. How would Ron cope with that?

At least, he realized, he and Hermione finally admitted their feelings for each other. She would help him. She'd never abandon him. He wouldn't be alone in this.

Harry looked up at Lupin and said, "I'm going to transfigure. Have you ever ridden a horse bareback? It's a bit like that, but you want to really grip my mane tightly, and use your knees to grip me as well. Don't worry about hurting me; if you fall from a couple of hundred feet in the air, it's you who'll be hurt. Or dead."

Lupin shook his head again. "No, Harry. Remember? It takes very specific things to kill me." He gave Harry a small smile. "However--I would probably break every bone in my body, and I wouldn't have the luxury of death's escape. And the moon is full again tonight. I'm not sure what a werewolf transformation is like for someone who's broken every bone in his body, but I'll go out on a limb and speculate that it would be even more agonizing than usual." Then he looked at the basilisk amulet on Harry's chest. "What's that?" he asked with his eyes narrowed. "Is that silver?"

Harry looked down. "I don't think so. I've worn it day in and day out for almost two years, even in the shower, and I've never polished it. It would be black from tarnish by now if it were silver, wouldn't it?"

Lupin put his hand out toward it; he hesitated for a moment, then grasped it quickly, holding it in his hand tightly. Harry looked down, horrified as he saw smoke begin to seep from between the werewolf's fingers. Harry knocked his hand away. Lupin held up his palm, and Harry could see a perfect impression of the basilisk pendant burned into the flesh of Lupin's hand.

"Just a mild burn, really. It's not pure silver, or this burn would be a lot worse, but it's probably an alloy of some kind. It might have been magically treated to prevent tarnishing."

Harry frowned, suddenly thinking of something. "Professor, does that mean you can't handle silver Sickles?"

He nodded. "And did you never notice that at my place at the staff table, there is a set of steel tableware for my use only?" He shuddered.

"Although I might enjoy meals more if the entire Great Hall weren't filled with people cutting and stabbing their food with silver utensils...."

Harry had never realized somehow that he ate every day with real silver. "Ron will need that too, I suppose," he said softly. Lupin nodded.

"And if we do this, if I ride you, I probably *should* be careful of hurting you; werewolves are naturally stronger than humans. Even when I'm not in wolf form, I'm always having to temper my grip and be careful when I'm doing simple things like opening a door, so I don't use too much force and take it off the hinges by accident. Ron will have to learn about that too. I'm used to it, after all these years. You probably never even noticed. But he already seems to be unaware of how strong he is, and that was *before* I bit him. No offense to your best friend, but he's not exactly what you'd call 'graceful,' is he? If he's not careful, he'll be single-handedly destroying Hogwarts castle."

Harry laughed. "No, he's not graceful, that's true. But he's grown much better at dueling this year. Is there anything else you need to tell him?"

"Well, I should definitely warn him about--" Lupin started to answer, then closed his mouth and actually blushed, surprising Harry. "On second thought--it's nothing I particularly want you to hear. You know, Harry--perhaps I should talk to Ron alone. That is--when he's ready to talk. He'll probably be hacked off at me for a while."

Harry wondered what Lupin had been about to say, and what he didn't want Harry to hear. He changed into his griffin form and spread his wings, then felt Lupin climb onto his back and grip his mane tightly. He took a running leap into the air and soon they were flying over the treetops, returning to Hogwarts to see his best friend:

Ron Weasley, the werewolf.

* * * * *

Harry opened the door to the infirmary cautiously. No one had seen him and Professor Lupin returning to the castle. Lupin had gone directly to the headmaster's office to speak to him about what had transpired during the previous evening. Harry knew that the wounded among his charges would be in the infirmary, and it was his duty to go see them. He had inhaled a good deal of smoke himself during the battle, and when he was in his human form, he frequently broke out into coughing jags. Walking back to the castle, he'd had to pause several times to catch his breath, and Remus Lupin stood patiently and waited for him before they continued.

Harry looked around the infirmary. Almost the entire Dueling Club was present, plus Professor Snape and a couple of seventh-years who, Harry imagined, had been injured while helping Dumbledore and the elves to put out the fire Hermione had started for the purpose of having illumination.

Harry found Ron quickly, and was startled to see his eyes looking back at him. He strode quickly across the room and stood helplessly by his side, unable to say anything. Ron's left upper arm and left shoulder were bandaged. He was otherwise unclothed from the waist up. The scratches and gashes on his face looked as though they were healing rapidly. *He really needs a shave, Harry thought.* Ron wore a beard, but it was usually a very close-cropped beard. Overnight it looked as though it had sprouted several weeks worth of growth, and his chest was definitely hairier than Harry remembered it being.

Harry pulled up a chair and sat down. He saw now that Hermione was in the next bed, curled on her side, asleep. The scratches on her face hadn't healed yet, unlike Ron's, and she had a bandage around her right ankle. Her face was very peaceful. He saw that Ginny was in the bed next to Hermione's, and Draco Malfoy in the one just beyond that. Like most of the other students, they were both fast asleep.

Harry looked back at Ron. He couldn't place Ron's expression. It seemed to be a combination of hatred, fear, and despair. Harry didn't know what to say.

"Did you kill him?" Ron asked suddenly, his voice very hard.

Harry furrowed his brow. "Who?"

"The werewolf who bit me! That's why you were chasing him, isn't it? So--is he dead?"

"Ron--it was Lupin."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Well, not *know* so much as I suspected. So did you?"

"No, Ron, I did not kill Remus Lupin!" he said, raising his voice. "He's--he's really broken up about this..."

"*He's* broken up about this!" Ron said, his voice also going up. "Oh, *that's* rich."

"Ron! He was set up! Just before the moon became full last night, someone attacked the Shrieking Shack and he had to run to the forest. He never knew humans would be in there. He did everything he could to avoid this, but now that it's happened you just have to deal with it!"

"That's easy for you to say. You're not going to become a monster at sundown today."

"No, but I'll be there for you. I can accompany you. And--" he glanced over at the sleeping form of Severus Snape on the other side of the room "--perhaps Snape will feel up to making the two of you a batch of Wolfsbane Potion, so it won't be so bad..."

"The two of us? What, do you think I want to hang out with him tonight because he's made me like him now? That doesn't make us mates. He's the last person I want to see right now."

"Ron, you need to let him talk to you. First of all, he's beside himself that this happened. Second, he knows things. Things that can help you. Things you need to know to prepare yourself. He's learned about it all the hard way, but you have the benefit of being able to hear about it all from someone who's been there, who's lived with this almost all his life. Let him help you."

"Ron," said a quiet voice behind Harry; he turned in surprise, not having heard the infirmary door open. "I do want to help you."

Ron Weasley looked into Remus Lupin's eyes with the deepest loathing. "*Get out of here,*" he said in a low growl. "I don't want to see you." Harry thought he actually saw small red lights flickering in Ron's otherwise dark blue eyes.

"Ron," the werewolf said again. "There are things—things you need to know. We don't have much time. Before you know it, the sun will be going down again, and about forty-eight minutes after that the full moon will rise. Since it was already full last night, it will be full right away tonight. You need to know what to expect, how to cope. I had to do it alone when I was a small child. I don't want you to have to go through what I did."

"You don't want--" Ron said in a low, barely controlled sarcastic voice. "How *kind* of you," he said snidely. "You know what I wanted to be doing tonight?" His eyes wandered over to Hermione, a pained expression on his face that broke Harry's heart. He thought he saw a tear glisten in one of Ron's eyes. "But--but I can never be with her now. I can't be with anyone now--"

Harry swallowed. He didn't know what to say. They'd had only a very brief moment in the forest before Ron was attacked. Now he was changed

forever. He was a werewolf. "Ron," Lupin said evenly, "you don't have to despair of that. If she's not--not averse to your being a werewolf--"

"I'm averse to my being a werewolf. I'm afraid of hurting her--of hurting anyone. How can I ask her to be with me when--" He trailed off, looking like his throat wouldn't function.

"Ron, I'm sure there are werewolves who have--relationships--"

"Yeah, yeah, and normal lives, and who are healthy, contributing members of society. Blah, blah, blah," Ron finished for him, a very sarcastic edge to his voice, even for Ron Weasley. "Hullo!" he said, sounding disingenuous suddenly--falsely so. "Why don't we just ask Lupin here how his wife and kids cope--oh, wait. We can't. He hasn't *got* a wife and kids. And neither will I. Ever. I'm going to be alone for the rest of my miserable life."

Harry's jaw dropped. "After waiting all these months for me to finally get it into my head that I should break up with her, after *telling* me I should break up with Hermione and getting me hacked off at you, you're going to do *this* to her?"

"Harry--*being* with her would be 'doing' something to her. I'm trying to protect her. I have no right to ask her to be with me now." His voice grew very soft as he turned and looked at her peaceful slumbering face. "I've no right to ask anyone to be with me now, even as a friend."

"Ron, don't be stupid. If you think we're going to stop being your friends because of this, you're mad. You need your friends now. You can't push us away."

But the gangly boy turned over on his right side, his back away from Hermione. "Go away. Let me get used to living my life alone."

Harry stared helplessly back and forth between his two best friends, then looked at Lupin, whose face was very grim. This wasn't just going to be difficult, Harry thought. With someone as stubborn as Ron Weasley, this was going to be damn near impossible.

Suddenly, the door to the infirmary banged open and an extremely irate young wizard was standing there, seething.

"Potter, you bastard! I'm going to kill you!" he declared, glaring at Harry, who swallowed and reached instinctively for his wand. He didn't have to wonder why the other wizard was saying this. "Because of you, my brother is dead!" he went on, spit flying from the corners of his mouth. His wand was pointing menacingly at Harry, who extended his own wand arm, ready.

Harry had thought this might happen; he just wasn't prepared for how soon it had happened. The wand pointing at him was shaking with fury. He gripped his own wand so tightly his knuckles hurt. His heart thumping loudly in his ears, he looked into the red, angry face of his accuser.

Chapter Twenty-One

My Other Life

Roger Davies glared at Harry malevolently. Both of them gripped their wands tightly. "Thanks to your stupid idea of taking students into the forest on a suicide mission, my brother is *dead!*" he said through gritted teeth. He extended his wand arm. "So help me, I'm going to hex you until--"

"Aaaargh!" Ron suddenly screamed, launching himself at Davies from his infirmary bed. Harry could never figure out just how he arrived across the large room so quickly; it seemed that he blinked and then Ron was just *there*, with Davies pinned against the wall, his wand on the floor. Ron was holding Roger Davies up so that he was a good foot-and-a-half above the floor, his large hands around Davies' upper arms. Harry hoped he wouldn't change his mind about this and put his hands around Davies' throat--but it wasn't for Davies' sake that he thought this. Swallowing, Harry realized Ron could probably snap Roger's neck like a twig if he really wanted to. He'd had a blanket draped loosely around his shoulders when he'd been in bed, but the blanket had fallen from him when he sprang across the room, and now he stood in just his pajama trousers (too short, as usual), the rippling muscles across his back in plain sight, as well as the scars on his left arm and neck which were healing remarkably fast. Ron looked frighteningly powerful and ruthless; Harry came running to his side with his wand still in his hand, and when he looked in Ron's eyes, he could see that red glint there again.

Suddenly, Lupin cried, "Ron! Put him down!" as he strode across the room to stand on the other side of the young werewolf.

Ron looked at him, a truculent expression contorting his features. Without answering, Ron turned back to Davies and reluctantly lowered him to the floor. This, Harry thought, was going to be as bad as house-training Dunkirk. All the same, he was grateful for Ron putting some fear into Davies. He made a personal mental note never to hack off his best friend ever again. Ron backed up from Davies after putting him down, slowly removing his hands from his arms. The former Ravenclaw was the color of parchment. He put his hands on his upper arms, wincing, and surveyed Ron nervously, through narrowed eyes, looking far less likely to start

hexing anyone than he had when he'd first entered. Ron, on the other hand, was still glowering at him.

"It isn't Harry's fault your traitorous brother is dead!" Ron spat at him. "Evan turned on me and Cho when we were doing reconnaissance. He tried to hex and curse us, he left the rest of us to deal with dark wizards and giant spiders, and then he put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry! So maybe you should be glad he's dead, because if he weren't, he'd either be going to Azkaban or getting the Dementor's Kiss!"

Roger's face, if it was possible, grew even paler. "He--he *what*? You're mad!"

Harry shook his head. "Cho can verify all this. And others saw him curse me, too. It's true."

Roger Davies swallowed. He looked down, then up. "Do--do my parents have to know?" he asked Harry, his voice suddenly hoarse. He did not look like someone who'd been Head Boy. Harry wondered again about his memory of Roger and Alicia at the village school. It suddenly struck him how very odd it was, since Roger and Alicia had never gotten on well when he was Head Boy and she was Head Girl. He didn't remember a time when Alicia wasn't rolling her eyes at everything Roger said, and when Alicia stepped in and took over prefects' meetings, sometimes Roger looked angry enough to spit. And he'd been with Fleur Delacour, of all people; Ron hadn't been the only other Hogwarts boy gaping at her when she'd been staying at Hogwarts. Not that Alicia's appeal was totally lost on Harry; he'd been amazed that the Draco in his other life had resisted the half-naked Alicia in his bed, and he *had* once responded to her kissing him. But Harry thought that most young men would choose Fleur over Alicia in a heartbeat, for even though Alicia was very pretty, Fleur was positively other-worldly. What was Roger playing at?

Harry considered Roger Davies' request before answering. "Your parents should know what he did. Otherwise they'll expect some kind of huge tribute for him. And I don't feel like dealing with your parents trying to hex me like you almost did when *I'm* the one who was on the business end of an Unforgivable Curse. I'm not going to praise someone as a hero who was a traitor. That's just not going to happen. And if Dumbledore asks us to all stand and drink to him--I'm going to stay in my seat, and I'm going to ask everyone else in Gryffindor to do the same."

Harry had brought his face very close to Roger's and let him see that Ron's anger was just part of what he had to fear if he started trouble because of his brother's death. Davies swallowed once more, looking back and forth between the two of them, starting to look less agreeable again, but obviously not interested in having Ron's hands back on him.

"I'm going to see Dumbledore," he said tersely, his mouth barely opening. He slammed the door behind him.

As he left, Ron called after him, "Yeah, you do that! See how far you get hexing *him*!"

Afterward, Ron, Harry and Lupin stood looking at each other awkwardly. Lupin put his hand up on Ron's shoulder; Ron was almost a head taller than his teacher.

"You can't *do* that Ron," he said gently but firmly, as one would to a small child. Harry saw that Ron had the good grace to hang his head--but then he lifted it, looking rebellious again.

"He was going after Harry. Was I just supposed to let him?"

"Ron," Harry said now, "have I ever let Roger Davies best me at dueling?" He smiled at his best friend, who smiled back, reluctantly admitting this with his silence. Lupin nodded at them both.

"Harry can take care of himself, Ron. You know that. We both understand, however, that your intentions were good. Harry's your best friend. He--"

--saved my life," Ron finished, staring at Harry. After an awkward pause, Ron said quietly, glancing nervously over his shoulder in Hermione's direction first, "Look, Harry. I owe you so much. I--I never should have said what I did back in August. I think--I think if you do it with a lot of *I'm sorrys* and groveling Hermione will take you back. Do it. I know you care about her. I do. And I can't--"

But Harry was shaking his head. "Weren't you the one telling me that she's not property? You can't just hand her back to me Ron. She doesn't belong to either one of us. She's her own person. She'll decide what she wants to do. But personally--I think she wants to be with you."

"Not any more."

"How do you know? Did she say that?"

"No, but any sensible woman wouldn't want to be with me. And Hermione is nothing if not *sensible*."

Harry sighed. "Let's give it all some time. Maybe you should just decide to have a cooling-off period while you adjust to, um, the changes you're going to experience. It's true that it's probably not the best time for starting a relationship. But she'll wait for you, I think." He paused before saying, "She's been waiting for you since September, you great twit. Well--she's probably been waiting for you since the Yule Ball in fourth year, but in September--"

He frowned at Harry. "What?"

Harry sighed. "What part don't you get? The twit part or the waiting-for-you-since-September part? You know, when you asked her to tell you that she didn't love you and she couldn't?"

Ron's jaw dropped. "How do you know about that? She wouldn't have told you--"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You seem to have forgotten that I have an Invisibility Cloak. I *witnessed* it."

Ron stepped back and stopped using a soft voice. Harry berated himself, thinking, *Way not to hack off a werewolf.* "You *what?*" Ron practically squeaked. He was livid.

Harry still kept his voice low so others wouldn't hear; however, Lupin's proximity meant he heard everything just fine. "I wasn't *trying* to spy on you. I wondered where you were so I checked my map. I saw you were both in the common room so I figured you were both okay and in for the night. But then I noticed that Ginny was wandering around the castle and it looked like Filch was going to catch her, so I went to get her with my Invisibility Cloak so she wouldn't be caught." Harry omitted the information about Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner being in the Trophy Room. "When I came down to the common room wearing my cloak and I saw that the pair of you had fallen asleep at one of the tables, I was hoping I could sneak out without you waking up, but unfortunately, that didn't happen. *Then* I had to wait for you both to leave the common room so you wouldn't know I was going out the portrait hole...."

"But--but you were going to help Ginny. Why wouldn't you want us to know that?"

"Er--" Harry stalled, trying desperately to think of a plausible lie. He took entirely too long, though, and Ron's eyes opened wide in understanding.

"You didn't just see Ginny on the map, did you? You saw her with Malfoy, I'll bet!" Ron hissed through his teeth, turning to glare in the direction of the slumbering blond boy near his sister.

"It's--it's not what you think, Ron," Harry said quickly. He could actually tell the truth now--most of it. That made it easier. "Listen--she was planning to meet him, yes. But Filch kept making it hard for her to reach their meeting place, and Malfoy headed back down to the dungeons after the time they were supposed to meet came and went. She didn't have any way of knowing he'd gone back, and I was afraid Filch was about to catch her, so I went and fetched her back to Gryffindor Tower."

Ron frowned at him again. "And you didn't bother telling me about this. Nice one, Harry. This was in *September*."

Harry threw up his hands. "Ron--nothing happened. They never met up. You don't know they were meeting to do anything other than--other than talk." Harry almost believed that they'd really been planning to meet, he'd been talking about it so convincingly to Ron. Now he remembered that Draco Malfoy had been meeting Mariah Kirkner, that Ginny had accidentally found the note. He glanced at the bed in which Mariah was sleeping, noticing that her hands on the top of the blanket no longer had their fingerless gloves, and they looked fine. He moved his eyes back to Ron, who was looking as though he knew Harry wasn't telling him the whole truth. But then--Harry didn't know the whole truth either, and he didn't want Ron putting Draco Malfoy up against the wall the way he'd just done with Davies. Well, he kind of *did* want Ron doing that, but he knew that he *shouldn't* want it (and that Ron shouldn't do it).

"How do you know they haven't met some other night since then? It's been months!"

Harry sighed. "All right, I *don't* know. What was I supposed to do, spend all night every night staring at that map to see whether she was leaving Gryffindor Tower and he was leaving Slytherin House? I got into enough trouble not sleeping last summer--" he started to say, then actually bit his tongue to stop himself saying any more.

"What trouble?" Ron wanted to know. Harry's tongue was sore and his mouth was a thin line. He looked at the floor. When he looked up, Lupin was squeezing Ron's shoulder still, and he looked like he was doing it hard enough to make Ron wince. He realized suddenly that Lupin must be very strong and muscular under the tattered robes. He remembered the way the tailored suit Harry had bought him for Dudley's funeral had hung on his body, making him look very dapper, but Harry hadn't suspected the power that was hiding beneath the costume. He remembered thinking that Remus Lupin had resembled a hairy accountant.

"Never mind," Harry said, hoping Ron would drop it. "It's just a good idea to get a full night's sleep, and I can't spend every night babysitting Ginny. She's a big girl."

Lupin finally got Ron's attention. "Ron--get back into bed. I have a lot of things to talk to you about. First thing--you need to remember how strong you are now. You can break delicate objects and hurt people without meaning to. You have to relate physically to the world in a completely different way. Over the years I've bought some books about martial arts I can lend you. I never wanted to train formally, because I was afraid of hurting others, but I learned a lot of techniques for clearing my mind and controlling my physical reactions to the world. It's very calming, like a

kind of meditation. We can train together because we're of comparable strength. And it's also good for learning to control your temper."

Harry frowned at him now. "You never seem like you have trouble with that."

Remus Lupin raised one eyebrow and said placidly. "Werewolves have terrible tempers, whether or not they're in their wolf form. Much more volatile than the average human, and *you*, Ron, were already more volatile than most people," he said, nodding at the tall redhead. "You two may think I don't have a temper, but that's because of the techniques I mentioned. I've worked for years at controlling myself. I don't just try to do that when I take the Wolfsbane Potion. It's a constant, daily struggle. Every moment of every day I work to stay in control, to not let my inner wolf rule me. You'll have to learn that too, Ron. It won't be easy. Please let me help you."

Ron looked sadly at the older man. "You've done this all your life?"

Lupin shook his head. "I didn't learn about some of these techniques until after I was out of school. And when I was in school, well--Sirius was such a hot-head, *anyone* else around him seemed like a milquetoast by comparison." He smiled and the boys smiled back at him. Harry was amazed, listening to Lupin. He always seemed so even-tempered, so easy-going. That this was a façade he'd cultivated carefully over the years and struggled to maintain daily was a shock to Harry.

Ron returned to his bed and Harry sat on a chair between his bed and Hermione's. Hermione rolled over in her sleep and was facing them now, her hair falling over her face slightly. Suddenly, her eyes opened. She closed them, then opened them again, then leaped from her bed, throwing her arms around Harry.

"Harry! You're all right! Oh, I thought--"

He held her tightly for a moment; she had never seemed so small and vulnerable, and yet he knew she was tough as nails. He thought of what might have happened if he hadn't caught her when she was falling from the tree....

Then he held her away from him, at arm's length, leaning in briefly to kiss her brow. "I'm fine. Even well-fed. Lupin and I had breakfast at a Muggle pub on the other side of the forest. We had a good talk." He looked across Ron's bed at his teacher, who had gone back to looking grim. Harry separated completely from Hermione and led her to Ron's bed. She sat on the edge, looking at him uncertainly.

"Ron?"

He was sitting up against the pillows, on top of the blankets. There seemed to be much more red hair on his chest and arms than there had been the day before, and his beard needed a trim. Hermione found his hand and laced her fingers in his. "You know I'm here for you. And that--I want to help you." She gazed at him like she was trying to memorize him. Then Harry had a thought, and brightened considerably.

"Hermione! You should help Snape make the Wolfsbane Potion, so you can learn to do it too!"

Hermione frowned. "I don't know. I mean, Professor MacDermid has been trying to do it all year...."

Ron laughed; Harry was glad to hear it. "That's MacDermid. You're Hermione Granger. Of course you can learn to do it!"

"I'll have you know," came a cold voice from across the room, "that that is my uncle you are disparaging." They all turned in surprise to see Severus Snape sitting up, his long black hair contrasting with his white hospital smock. "And when it comes to disparaging my uncle--" he went on, a thinly-veiled threat behind his words "--I am the sole person permitted to do it." Harry tried not to grin. He was back! And the same as ever--minus the amputated fingers. Harry looked at the bandages on Snape's hands, trying not to think about it....

"Is it true, Remus, that my uncle has failed to make a proper draught of Wolfsbane Potion?"

Lupin nodded. "I'm afraid so, Severus."

Then Snape looked levelly at Harry, and Harry caught his breath, it was so like the last time he'd seen his stepfather, at Dover....

"And is it true, Potter, that you are the one who led the students in the Dueling Club into the forest to retrieve me and Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, sir," he said quietly. "The teachers weren't available. And Draco Malfoy had already gone into the for--"

"Well the bloody letter said to come alone!" Malfoy snapped, pulling himself up in his bed. Harry turned to him. The other boy was paler than usual and looked as though he hadn't slept for a week, even though he'd just awoken. Harry smiled ruefully.

"Good morning to you too, Malfoy."

Draco Malfoy grimaced at him. "And Granger--did you have to set the whole bloody forest on fire?"

Hermione groaned and closed her eyes. "I was aiming for a small tree that wasn't near any others. It would have gone out after a little while without spreading the fire to other trees. Then Wormtail swooped at me while I was doing the spell, and I wound up hitting this huge dried-up old tree....Do you think I *planned* to burn the forest down?"

Harry smiled at her. "Well, I did *wonder*, but that makes a lot more sense."

Then Ginny awoke and joined the conversation, and Harry found it very difficult to stop looking at her. When he finally succeeded he met Snape's gaze, which looked very knowing. He saw Snape move his eyes back to Ginny and raise his eyebrows questioningly. Harry remembered that he had heard him speaking to Ginny in the forest, saying the same thing James Potter had said to Lily Evans. He drew his lips into a line and stood, addressing Ron, Hermione and Lupin.

"I should probably go to see Dumbledore too, find out what kind of stink Davies is going to raise."

Lupin came with him to the door of the infirmary. "Actually, we should probably both see him." They bade the others goodbye, Harry giving Snape a small smile and a nod, which, to his surprise, was returned.

It was so strange to be back in the castle. When they were in the corridor outside the infirmary, Harry turned to his professor. "Will--will it do much good for you and Ron to have the potion? Since you weren't taking it during the entire week before the full moon?"

Lupin looked perplexed. "I honestly don't know. One thing I want to talk to the headmaster about is where we'll spend the night. I don't think we want to go back to the forest, frankly...."

Harry thought furiously. "What about--what about the dungeons? We can all be locked in a cell together."

"What do you mean 'we'?"

Harry swallowed, trying to seem braver than he felt. "Do you think I'm going to let my best friend go through this alone? I can maintain my griffin form fine now. I've been fully trained for a year-and-a-half. Hell, the first time I *flew* it was an emergency, and I had no idea whether I'd be able to do it. Hermione and I could have plunged to our deaths, or we could have broken every bone in our bodies, at the very least. Then we probably would have *wished* we were dead. I didn't know I'd be using my Animagus training for this when I started studying with McGonagall, but I'm glad that I can do this for Ron. You can't talk me out of it."

Lupin's mouth was very thin. "I can see that. Well, I suppose it's not up to me. We'll see what the headmaster has to say." He started to move away, but Harry put his hand on his arm to stop him.

"Professor--" he began, then hesitated. "There's--there's something else I'm worried about. When it comes to Ron. He--he seemed so depressed. Have you--have you ever heard of a werewolf who--um--who--"

Lupin looked at the door nervously. "Harry, I really think we should go up to see the headmaster...."

--who committed suicide?" Harry finally finished, his voice very soft. Lupin sighed.

"Harry, this isn't the place to discuss this...."

"But I'm worried! I've never seen him like this. And he's so strong now. It would be hell to disarm him. Not take his wand from him, but take a different sort of weapon from him. I--I didn't save his life just to have him go into a depression and take it himself--"

Lupin's frown deepened. "Harry!" he said sharply now. "Let's take this upstairs. Now." But it was too late. The infirmary door swung open suddenly, and Ron was standing there. Lupin sighed. "Did I forget to mention, Harry, that Ron now has hearing that is far more acute than the average human's?" He tried to sound casual, but Harry felt himself reddening as Ron glowered at him.

"I'm--I'm sorry Ron. But I *am* worried...."

Ron had looked upset when he'd first opened the door, but now he looked at Harry's face and relented. "I--I know Harry. And yes; I'm depressed as hell. I won't lie to you; I feel bloody suicidal. But--but saying that--I don't know. Maybe it helps. Admitting it. And knowing that my best friend would never let me do that...."

"Best friends," Harry corrected him. "That's the last thing in the world Hermione wants either."

Ron nodded, grimacing ruefully. "I heard what you said, Harry. About not letting me go through this alone. I just want you to know--I appreciate it."

Harry gave him a small smile. "What can I say? You're stuck with me, mate."

Ron grinned at him then, and Harry grinned back. It was so wonderful to see Ron do that; the smile didn't stop with his mouth, but went to his eyes as well, the way it did when Ron really *meant* a smile.

"Anyway--I kind of already knew about the hearing. I could hear everything Pomfrey was saying to Dumbledore in her office last night, and everything he was saying to McGonagall out here in the corridor, as well." He looked at Lupin with a lopsided conspiratorial smile. "Didn't you ever tell your head-of-house or headmaster about that when you were a student? Or did you just find it convenient for the adults not to know how well you could hear?"

Harry noted that Lupin reddened slightly. "I--I prefer not to discuss the things that make me different when I can help it. My sense of smell is also very acute--as is yours, now. And if I went into a pitch-black closet, I could also see all of the objects in it with perfect clarity. Night-vision. However--it only extends to objects. I wouldn't be able to read words on paper or parchment, or in books. Not unless they were raised, unless they had some sort of *shape*." His eyes twinkled mischievously now. "Didn't you ever wonder how I knew that Miss Brown and Miss Patil were having conversations about their astrological charts when they were supposed to be listening to my lectures?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "That's not fair! At least we knew about Moody's eye!" Ron laughed.

"Just try to keep secrets from me now, Harry," he said with a wink, looking much more cheerful. Harry laughed too.

"All right, all right. You go have a lie-down. I'll be back." Ron nodded at them both and returned to the infirmary.

* * * * *

After Lupin gave the password to the gargoyle and they rode up the rising spiral stairs, they knocked on the headmaster's door and were immediately admitted.

"Ah, Remus and Harry. There you are. Do come in. Mr. Davies is gone." He did not rise but sat at his desk, his fingertips together. He stared at his hands in seeming fascination. Harry saw that the former headmasters were dozing in their frames as usual as he and Lupin sat in the chairs before his desk. The fireplace was dark. Fawkes wasn't on his perch; Harry supposed he had flown out of one of the windows, all of which were opened to the spring breezes.

The three of them sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. Dumbledore didn't seem in the least bit interested in asking them where they were all night and the early part of the morning. He did not immediately sack Lupin for biting Ron. He simply sat quietly, deep in thought. Finally, the headmaster stood and went to one of the open windows expectantly. In Fawkes flew, a parchment in his beak. Dumbledore took it from him and gave him a strip of meat from a bowl near the window. He sat down at his

desk, unrolling the parchment and peering down through his spectacles to read it, nodding and murmuring, "Mmm..." every so often as he read. When he was done, he rolled up the parchment again and looked at Harry and Remus Lupin over his spectacles.

"It is happening all over again. Twenty years ago we had a devil of a time with Imperius, and we are again having a great deal of trouble with it. Blaise Zabini and the other Slytherins who duped the professors into entering the Slytherin common room claim to have been cursed. They are at the Ministry, being questioned by Eustace Bean. Viktor Krum's wand was recovered by Aurors who combed through the site of the confrontation, and through *Priori Incantatem* it was found to have performed the Imperius Curse the last thing before his death. And in this transcript I have of an interview with Peter Pettigrew at the Ministry last night, he says that Krum was friendly with Zabini and performed the curse on him to assure that the teachers would be unable to come to the forest. Now, Zabini's wand also revealed that he performed Imperius, but if *he* was under Imperius when he did it, he is blameless. And although we have only a small amount of evidence to that effect at the moment, if a jury believes it is *enough* evidence, he will go free. The other Slytherins who were helping him performed spells to stun and bind their teachers, but no Unforgivable Curses. And since it seems that they were under Imperius, cast by Zabini, it is possible that they will be exonerated as well, after further investigation. Certainly I will not take house points from any student who was magically compelled to attack teachers."

He sighed. "Now, Professor Flitwick....it seems that the potion was given to him by none other than our Head Girl, Cho Chang. He's right as rain now. He said she came to him with it, saying it was a cheering potion she was working on, and would he mind testing it for her."

Harry frowned. "But--but Flitwick is the most cheerful person I know. Who'd notice any difference?"

Dumbledore laughed. "Well, Professor Flitwick, being a naturally cheerful person, as you noted, wanted to help her, of course. He's her head-of-house. She's the Head Girl. It never occurred to him she would ever do anything untoward. And it wasn't a dangerous potion, merely a harmless sleeping draught. I talked to Miss Chang last night, after we returned to the castle, and she remembers nothing of this. Pettigrew confirmed, however, that Krum put her under Imperius to give Flitwick the potion, and he also put a complicated memory charm on her, as well. It is contingent upon the execution of a task. When the task is completed, all memory of it is lost. So, if we are to believe Pettigrew, neither Miss Chang nor Mr. Zabini are remotely responsible for their actions."

Harry frowned. "I suppose Evan Davies was under Imperius too? Wouldn't *that* be convenient...."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "That's the interesting part. According to Pettigrew, he had no knowledge of a member of the Dueling Club being a Death Eater. In fact, he says that as far as he knows, the only student at the school who currently has the Dark Mark is Draco Malfoy. We checked Zabini--no mark. None of the other Slytherins have it either. Of course, with Evan Davies...." Dumbledore cleared his throat. "The--the body is so severely burned, it is impossible to tell whether his arm ever bore the mark. But Pettigrew insists that if Evan Davies was a Death Eater, it was being kept secret from him. It is possible that he was a Death Eater sympathizer, someone who would have been easy to recruit had he been asked. Perhaps what he did in the forest was his way of volunteering for the cause, you might say."

Harry stood, pacing, deep in thought. Then he remembered something. "He seemed fine until he went off with Cho and Ron to do reconnaissance. Although...he stayed separate from the other Ravenclaws before that....Is it possible that Viktor also told *her* to put Imperius on Evan when *he* put Imperius on *her*? And then the memory charm wiped out that memory as well, as soon as she put the curse on him...?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't know, Harry. If she did, it will be difficult to find out, since she performed subsequent spells. It's much more complicated to get a wand to give up more than the last spell it performed--you saw what it took for that to happen with Voldemort's wand, two years ago." Harry nodded, remembering the ghostly sights and sounds emanating from the wand that was locked with his in that golden web of light. "Pettigrew said only that Krum put Imperius on Miss Chang to give the potion to Professor Flitwick and on Zabini to take the other teachers prisoner. He didn't say anything about putting Imperius on Miss Chang to get *her* to put Imperius on another student in her house."

Harry's head was spinning. "So--was Evan Davies under a spell or wasn't he?"

Dumbledore threw up his hands. "We may never know. Certainly, his behavior seemed odd and erratic. He's never attacked you before, has he Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "I always liked Evan. A lot more than his brother, in fact. Now *Roger* Davies was always--" Harry stopped, and he felt the blood drain from his face. "What if--what if his own brother did it? To--to make Evan his agent! To do the things he couldn't do because he's out of school now. After all, he was being recruited by Lucius Malfoy last year. Just because Percy didn't need to follow up on his recruitment after Malfoy went to prison, what's to say that Roger didn't decide he wanted to be a Death Eater?" Harry swallowed, thinking of Alicia and Fleur.

"Hmm. We can look into that." He sighed. "But at the moment, given Evan's behavior, and the fact that we have no evidence to suggest he was

under a spell, I think we have to conclude that he was acting of his own volition, that his sympathies were with the Death Eaters, regardless of whether he'd been formally recruited and was known to be sympathetic by Voldemort or anyone else working for him. I would like to believe that he wasn't to blame for his actions, but at this time there's absolutely no basis for that hypothesis."

Harry remembered seeing Evan Davies dancing in the fire; he would see it in his nightmares for the rest of his life. Would it be more comforting to think that Evan died a Death Eater sympathizer, or that he was being controlled by his brother, or someone else? "So--will there be a tribute to Evan at the leaving feast or not?" he asked between clenched teeth.

Dumbledore's mouth was very thin. "We have time to decide that. How would you feel if there was, Harry?" Harry met the headmaster's gaze, feeling very confused.

"I--told Roger Davies that if you asked us all to stand and raise our goblets to him, I'd stay in my seat," he said softly.

Dumbledore nodded. "I know. He told me." The old man sighed wearily. "As much as I've managed to ignore it over the years, at times--and especially at times like this--my job is fraught with politics, Harry. Ambrose Davies is very influential in the Ministry. His conduct has always been beyond reproach. Eve Davies is a diligent member of the Hogwarts board of governors and a tireless fund-raiser for St. Mungo's. The Davies family has never been known to socialize with dark wizards. They have always been in favor of Muggle-born students attending the school. You may or may not be aware of the current debate on the board about possibly banning Muggle-born witches and wizards from attending Hogwarts, something Durmstrang did years ago. Eve has been very outspoken about what a wrong-headed idea that is." He sighed again. "I dread telling Eve and Ambrose of the circumstances of Evans' death. Roger will be telling them first, to soften the blow, but eventually I will have to face them. Their son was in my care."

Harry swallowed. How would he do it, if he had to? How did one tell grieving parents that their son had turned away from every good ideal that they held dear, and that doing so led directly to his death? "I--I had no idea, sir...."

"So, I will ask you again, Harry. If we do pay tribute to Evan Davies at the leaving feast, will you join in?"

Harry swallowed and looked at the tired old man before him. "I will do as you ask, Professor. If you say to stand and raise my goblet, I'll stand and raise my goblet," he said quietly.

Dumbledore smiled ruefully. "I appreciate that you don't want to pay tribute to someone who attacked you the way Evan did, who turned on you and the other students. But remember, Harry, that even if Evan did the wrong thing through a conscious and deliberate choice, that means we have to mourn the boy he was before he made that choice. He wasn't just the boy who attacked Ron Weasley and put the Cruciatus Curse on you. At some point in his life, Evan Davies was still untouched by whatever forces led to his death. At that time he was a good person and a good son. That person is worth mourning as much as Cedric Diggory."

Harry heard a quiet sob beside him and was shocked to see that Lupin had covered his face with his hands and his shoulders were shaking again. The werewolf had been very quiet so far. Dumbledore took out a handkerchief and handed it across the desk to Lupin, whispering, "You haven't had much to say, Remus," as though the man weren't sobbing noisily now.

Lupin took the handkerchief and wiped his face with it. Harry was surprised, but then he realized that he shouldn't have been. Had Dumbledore been trying to convince him he wasn't a bad person for what he'd done to Ron? Harry didn't know whether there was another motive to the headmaster's speech. Remus Lupin was collecting himself now, folding the damp handkerchief neatly on his lap, then raising his eyes to Dumbledore.

"What's to happen to me, Albus? The Ministry already came for Peter and the Slytherin students; when are they coming for me?"

The headmaster looked at him kindly. "The Ministry does not know yet that there is any cause for concern. They do not know you bit Ron Weasley."

Remus furrowed his brows and shook his head. "But--Snape didn't tell them? I thought surely--"

"No. No one else has told them either, to the best of my knowledge. Which isn't to say it isn't possible." He sighed. "And after all, Mr. Weasley is going to have to register himself as a werewolf. He will be asked where and when he was bitten, for the registry. They like to keep track of these things, in case there is an unregistered werewolf they should know about or a registered werewolf who has done the biting..."

Harry swallowed. "And what if they decide that Professor Lupin was the one who bit Ron, based on where and when he says it happened? What will happen to him then?"

"Well--Ron will be encouraged to bring charges against him. Since werewolves fall under the Creatures Division, if Remus loses the trial--"

Harry frowned, then remembered the last "creature" he knew of who went on trial--Buckbeak. And when he lost, the sentence was--

"No!" he cried. "They can't! He was doing everything he could to avoid--"

"Harry, Harry, settle down. I said that Ron will be *encouraged* to bring charges. He is of age, so it is his decision, not his parents'. However, most of the time, no matter how irate a new werewolf is, the fact that he or she *is* a werewolf now gives them a degree of empathy for their attacker. The Ministry hasn't held a werewolf trial in many years. If no charges are pressed, there is a large fine payable to the Ministry and both the original werewolf and the newly-bitten one must provide satisfactory evidence of how they plan to prevent themselves from attacking others in the future. That is all. The Ministry even has facilities for werewolves to turn themselves in before the full moon each month. Three days of voluntary incarceration, just to be safe. Not many take advantage of it, but it is an option."

"You mean those underground cells at the Ministry?" Harry shuddered, remembering; it seemed just a step away from an internment camp. The two professors looked at him strangely, and he remembered that they didn't know he had first-hand knowledge of them, even though Dumbledore knew about the time change. "I mean--"

"Albus," Lupin said urgently. "No matter what Ron decides--I cannot in good conscience continue teaching here. Has--has Pettigrew acknowledged killing those Muggles? Has he cleared Sirius?"

"He has. After Davies left, I spoke to Fudge." He nodded at the now-dark fireplace. "He was *not* happy, but with a full confession in hand, there's not much he can do. Later today, Sirius will officially be declared innocent of the crimes for which he was imprisoned. There is to be a press conference at the Ministry. All of the foreign and domestic wizarding press have been alerted and should be there. Sirius can finally stop running."

Lupin smiled. "Good. So, then; you've got my replacement."

Dumbledore shook his head. "He thought you would do that. He's already said he'd refuse if it meant displacing you. I don't want you to leave, Remus, any more than Sirius wants to take your job."

Lupin swallowed. "I'm sorry, Albus. I just can't stay. I'm sorry if that leaves you in the lurch again, but--I just can't."

The old man nodded. "I understand. In the meantime, we have to work out what to do with you and Mr. Weasley for the next two nights...."

"I've already thought of something, sir," Harry said hurriedly. "There's the dungeons. You could lock the three of us in after they take some potion, and--"

He frowned. "The three of you?" Harry explained his plan, and the headmaster was silent for a few minutes, considering this. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. But understand, Harry, taking just a one dose of the potion instead of the recommended week's worth may have unpredictable consequences. And being locked up with one werewolf is vastly different from being locked up with two. Are you sure about this?"

Harry nodded. "Ron is my best friend."

Dumbledore stood. "Well, that's how Sirius feels as well, of course. He may also wish to join you, and then it will be four. I know of a rather large dungeon that will be appropriate. I can have the elves begin to prepare it."

Harry and Lupin rose, preparing to go, when suddenly, he remembered something else. "Oh, sir! The elves! Weren't they fantastic?" He grinned at the headmaster.

"Yes, Harry. In fact, Dobby is waiting to see you. Perhaps you should go down to the kitchens and find him." He paused. "Your opinion means a great deal to him. He and the other elves were exemplary in their performance. The Slytherins who took the teachers prisoner were subdued very quickly. You made good use of your people, Harry, both human and otherwise. You showed initiative and leadership far beyond your years, and I am very proud of you." His eyes twinkled at Harry, and Harry managed to forget how wretched he'd been feeling earlier at the thought of defying Dumbledore over Evan Davies' tribute.

"Thank you, sir."

"I also think--that the other members of the Dueling Club performed quite, quite well. Perhaps it's time for a few more people to be inducted into the Order of the Phoenix, eh Harry?"

Harry grinned. "Sounds perfect." Then Harry was about to ask where the other giants were, when he remembered--he already knew. They had gone north to the isolated island where the Hairy McBoons lived. They had grown weary of waiting around in the Forbidden Forest with nothing to do and since they had nothing to fear from the transfigured erstwhile Scotsmen, they were able to coexist peacefully with the strange orange five-footed creatures. Harry remembered seeing one of them when his stepfather had had them study boggarts in his other life. And then he remembered that Fridwulfa had stayed at Hogwarts to be near Hagrid, while Orst had stayed to be near Fridwulfa.

Harry was going to ask what was to become of Fridwulfa, but he decided not to. If she was going to be penalized in any way for contributing to Evan Davies' death, the headmaster would have said. Harry guessed, though, that she and Orst would be traveling north to join the other giants on the tiny island. Hagrid would no longer have his mum nearby. He decided that he should definitely not say anything about this; Dumbledore took his responsibility for Hagrid very seriously, even after all these years, and he probably didn't want to think about Hagrid losing his mother again....

But as he was turning to go, he had yet another thought. "Snape!" he said suddenly. They stared at him again. "Hasn't he wanted the Dark Arts job for years? He could do it and his uncle could continue doing Potions!" He remembered that his stepfather was a very good Dark Arts teacher. But Dumbledore shook his head.

"Where do people get the idea that Severus wants the Dark Arts job?" Harry remembered one of the Weasleys saying this at his sorting, but he didn't say so. "No; Severus has never particularly wanted that job. And I'm rather anxious to have him back in the Potions Dungeon." His eyes twinkled mischievously at Harry. "Perhaps the female students might pay some attention to their potions studies again, eh...?" Harry grinned at him, and Lupin gave a feeble smile as well.

Harry left the headmaster's office feeling lighter than he had in ages. Lupin left him to return to his private quarters, to bathe and change into fresh robes. After visiting the elves in the kitchens, and having a slew of them all over him, patting him on the back and pumping his hand, while Dobby exclaimed squeakily the whole time, Harry felt in need of a shower himself, so he went to the prefects' bathroom. Afterward, he returned to Gryffindor Tower. It was so strange to walk into the common room after everything he'd been through. Had it only been twenty-four hours earlier that he'd last been in here? It felt more like a lifetime. He half-expected everything to look different, but at the same time, he was comforted by the sameness, by the unchanging nature of the place. He went to his dorm and changed his clothes, then took out his map. When he'd activated it, he saw that Snape, Hermione and Ginny were in the Apothecary in the hospital wing. Ron's name was on one of the beds still, but most of the other beds had been vacated. Draco Malfoy was no longer in the infirmary, nor Mariah Kirkner. Parvati was still there, but Tony and Ruth were gone as well, plus Millicent Bulstrode and the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, including the Head Boy and Girl, Liam and Cho. He put the map away and left for the hospital wing again.

Although he'd seen their names in the same room on the map, they hadn't been so close together then. When he opened the infirmary door, Parvati was sitting in the chair next to Ron's bed, holding his hand, while Ron talked softly to her. Harry swallowed. *He couldn't*, he thought. *He*

wouldn't. Would he? He cleared his throat and approached the bed. Ron looked up, nonplused, but Parvati jumped up guiltily.

"Um--I just came from seeing Dumbledore," he told them, hoping Parvati would get Ron out of her system once and for all. Hadn't his saying Hermione's name been enough to put her off? Harry thought.

Ron swallowed. "What did he say?"

Harry took the chair Parvati had vacated, quietly telling his best friend about the werewolf registry, and that there would only be a trial if he pressed charges. "Which you're *not* going to do, *right?*" he said pointedly.

Ron nodded. "Right. No charges." He lay back and closed his eyes wearily, then opened them again. "How're they coming with the potion?" Harry shrugged.

"Dunno. How come Ginny's in there too?"

"Her idea. I'm her brother. She's gotten good at potions. If my own sister can make it--well, that'd be pretty convenient, don't you think?"

Harry nodded. Jamie would do it, if the same thing had happened to him, he thought. "She's probably not doing it because it's convenient, Ron. She's your sister and she loves you."

Then Harry remembered Jamie again, very vividly, letting him put his head on her lap and singing to him. Sometimes there was nothing quite so comforting as a sister. And here Ron was, with two sisters he knew nothing about....

"Ron," he said suddenly, without giving himself time to mentally talk himself out of it. "There's something I have to tell you. But first, you have to promise not to get upset."

Ron laughed. "Oh, that's a good way to start off any piece of news. What is it?"

"Do you promise?"

Ron took a deep breath through his nose and surveyed Harry thoughtfully for a half-minute. "Yeah. Okay."

"Well, last year when we were in your dad's office at the Ministry, I noticed those pictures of the little girls...."

"You mean our cousins?"

Harry drew his lips into a line. "They're not cousins, Ron. When we were at the Burrow later in the summer, Hermione found their pictures in an album in Ginny's room, and we asked your mum about them. Ron--they're your older sisters."

Ron's jaw had dropped. "What?"

So Harry explained to him about the kidnapping of Peggy and Annie Weasley, and his suspicion that it had been done with the *Tempus Fugit* charm. Ron sat very still, staring into space as he listened. When Harry was done, he looked at his best friend, wondering whether it was really wise to spring this on him when he'd just become a werewolf. Even though his parents should be the ones to tell him, he *knew*, and he just couldn't stand keeping it from his best friend any longer.

Ron stood and paced aimlessly, looking like a rage was building up inside him. Finally, he approached the wall where the door to the corridor was and suddenly he pulled back and punched the wall with all his might. The stones held, Harry was relieved to see, and Ron's hand seemed to be fine, but the candle stands on the bedside tables were rattling ever so slightly, and the chandelier overhead was swaying as if in a gentle breeze.

"Ron! You promised not to get upset!"

Ron whirled on him. "I thought you mean upset at you. And I'm not. Upset at you, I mean. I'm upset at--"

Harry swallowed. "Your parents?" Ron nodded, biting his lip so hard it was bleeding. "And Ginny?" But then Ron shook his head.

"Nah. I mean, yes she could have told me, but--she found out because she was in the Chamber of Secrets. And she was the girl Mum finally wanted...."

Harry shook his head. "Ron, your parents are proud of you...."

He threw up his hands. "Yeah, well, my being a werewolf will bring *that* to a screeching halt, won't it?"

Harry tried to get him to sit down, leading him back to his bed. "You really think that? Because I can't imagine them not being supportive about this. Come on, Ron, you *know* them...."

"Or thought I did. How could they not tell me I have two older sisters? If they stopped being proud of me or loving me because I'm a werewolf now, how would I know? They're pretty good liars, it turns out."

"Ron! Cut it out! I didn't tell you to upset you, or to make you hate your parents. I told you to--to tell you that I want to help you to find them!"

Ron frowned. "Find them? I thought you said the entire Ministry was looking for them when they disappeared. How do you expect to find them almost twenty years later?"

Harry clamped his mouth shut, then thought for a minute before answering. "I have some leads the Ministry didn't have back then. Do you trust me?"

Ron nodded. "You know I do, Harry. All right. Maybe this will help me--help me take my mind off other things...."

Harry put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "I'm here for you, Ron. And so is Hermione. Lean on us, depend on us. That's what friends are for."

Ron looked as though his eyes were glistening with tears. He swiped at them angrily with the backs of his hands, then smiled down at his best friend.

"I know, Harry. I know."

* * * *

Harry spent much of the afternoon keeping Ron company. They played Exploding Snap and wizarding chess. Every so often Ginny or Hermione came into the infirmary to report on the progress they were making with the potion. When Ginny was the one reporting, Harry found it very hard not to gaze constantly at her. When Hermione came into the infirmary, *she* was clearly finding it very difficult not to gaze longingly at Ron (who still had no shirt on). Harry sighed, seeing this, and thinking of how *he'd* been when Ginny was in the room. Everything was at sixes and sevens, it seemed.

He returned to the infirmary after eating dinner in the Great Hall. Sundown would occur in about thirty minutes, and the moon would rise forty-eight minutes after that, already full. Ron was sitting on the edge of his bed wearing his regular school robes over a simple button-down white shirt and jeans and the old brown shoes that should have been thrown out a year earlier. His knuckles were very white from gripping the edge of the mattress and he stared at the floor, looking apprehensive. Harry walked toward him.

"It's me, Ron," he said, since his best friend hadn't looked up yet. Now he did, and Harry saw both the fear and resolve in his dark blue eyes.

"I know. You have a distinctive rhythm when you walk upstairs. For one thing, you skip every other step, usually. And you tap the rhythm of that tune on the handrail as you go."

"What tune?"

"You know--that music box Hermione gave you plays it--"

Harry hadn't been aware of playing the rhythm of *Suogon* as he came up the stairs. "You could hear that?" Ron nodded, looking miserable, as though he were able to spontaneously grow a daisy from the top of his head or execute other party tricks that he thought made him seem like a freak. Harry looked around the room; Parvati was gone. Ron was the only one left. "Come on. Let's see how the potion's coming."

They went to Madam Pomfrey's office, which was empty. Going through to the Apothecary, they found Snape, Hermione, Ginny, Lupin and Duncan MacDermid standing over a cauldron that sat over a greenish-blue fire, with occasional flashes of magenta. Snape was using a ladle to transfer a steaming liquid into a large stone goblet, which he handed to Lupin. Ginny had been standing with another goblet at the ready, but now she thrust the goblet at Hermione and stepped forward to throw her arms around her brother.

Ron held her, his cheek on his hair, looking like he might cry. His emotions all seemed on edge since he was bitten; he was like an icicle suspended over stone. The slightest vibration could send the icicle crashing down, where it would shatter into uncountable and infinitesimally small shards. He also looked like the most comforting thing in the world right now was to have a sister who loved him and cared about him as much as Ginny. Harry felt his heart contract, thinking again about Jamie, and remembering seeing Ginny and Jamie together when he'd held his basilisk amulet. He wished the Ginny in this life could have known his sister.

Ginny pulled back and brushed Ron's hair out of his face. "Was your hair so long this morning?" she asked musingly. Ron held it out from his head appraisingly, looking at it out of the corner of his eye.

"Perhaps not. I've already trimmed my beard twice today."

Lupin nodded at him, but it was Snape who said, "It's bad today because of the moon. It will be tomorrow, too. Most of the month you'll see normal hair growth." Ron seemed to appreciate how straightforward and businesslike Snape was being. He still had the bandages on his hands while he worked, Harry noticed. When Snape handed him a steaming goblet, Ron nodded back at him.

"Thanks." Harry remembered all the times when they were younger, times when Ron insisted that Snape was *clearly* evil and out to get all Gryffindors, especially Harry. The thought almost made him want to laugh now. As Remus Lupin downed his goblet of potion, Ron looked uncertainly into his and then up at the Potions Master.

"Go on, Weasley. You don't want to wait too long."

Ron sniffed at the goblet and made a face. "Having a really good sense of smell is *not* an advantage right now."

Harry smiled. "Just be glad you're nowhere near Seamus' socks."

That made them all laugh, and Ron downed the contents of the goblet quickly, his Adam's apple bobbing. When he was done, he handed it back to Snape, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He and Lupin were both looking slightly green after consuming the potion, but they quickly recovered their equilibrium. Ron looked around the room with narrowed eyes.

"How am I supposed to--to *feel* after taking it? How do we know it's working?"

"We *don't* know, Weasley. Not about this. It's supposed to be taken for a week before the full moon. Neither one of you has been doing that--and in any case, *you* weren't a werewolf a week before the full moon."

You weren't a werewolf. Ron looked up at Snape, swallowing. It was as though hearing it from Snape made it *real*.

You weren't a werewolf. But you are now.

Harry looked at Lupin. "When is Sirius coming?"

Lupin checked his watch. "The press conference at the Ministry was schedule for six o'clock. He should be in the Leaky Cauldron in about ten to fifteen minutes so he can take the Floo Network to Hogsmeade. The headmaster is supposed to be meeting him there with a broom so he can get here quickly. I'd say we can expect him in about twenty minutes."

"Cutting it a bit close, isn't he?" Snape grumbled. Lupin shrugged.

"He knows we can't wait for him. If he gets here too late, he won't be with us. That's all there is to it." Harry swallowed. Then he'd be by himself with two werewolves, unable to safely transfigure himself into a human until the moon set. Although he'd done it the night before to keep an eye on Lupin, and he'd proposed it to Dumbledore, he'd been looking forward to having Sirius' company during the night as well, another animal who was used to doing a werewolf-watch, a companion who wouldn't be a danger to Harry's life if he couldn't maintain his Animagus form. He hadn't had a problem maintaining his griffin form for some time; the one thing that had ever made him change at a bad time was when he was flying over Northamptonshire and Voldemort had summoned the Death Eaters, sending blinding pain through his Dark Mark. He had no Dark Mark in this life, but he had a scar. What if Voldemort did something that made his scar hurt? Could he spontaneously transfigure back into a human from the pain?

Harry tried to put this out of his mind as they prepared to go. He noticed Duncan MacDermid examining the dregs of the potion from the goblets, as if that would tell him where he'd gone wrong in making the potion. Hermione and Ginny were coming, as well as Snape, but MacDermid did not. It seemed like a very long walk to their dungeon. By Harry's watch, it was just after sunset when they reached their destination. Snape and Lupin together took down the heavy wooden bar that was laced through enormous iron brackets. Snape then took out a ring of keys and unlocked three locks in the heavy metal door, finally pushing it into the cell. This dungeon had been chosen because of the extra security the door offered (there was also no window in the door). Inside, they saw two piles of hay, each in a corner away from the door, and a single narrow barred window of leaded glass high up on the wall. There was a trough of water next to the wall near the door. Harry looked around, swallowing; he was starting to think his cell at the Ministry had been downright luxurious.

The sun had gone down ten minutes ago; in just over thirty minutes the moon would rise. Where was Sirius? Harry wondered. Soon it would be too late for him to join them.

Before he could do anything to stop her, Hermione threw herself at Ron with a sob. He actually fell back from the impact, banging his head on the stone wall. He put his arms around her hesitantly, and Harry remembered him doing the same thing when they were younger, when Hermione had unexpectedly thrown herself at him. At the time, Harry had thought Ron was just thrown off by her sudden emotional outburst. Now knew that Ron had been taken aback by that hug because he already had feelings for Hermione and was afraid to show it....

Harry swallowed, watching them, then turned away. He raised his eyebrows at Ginny and Snape, hoping he wouldn't actually have to say aloud, *Come on, give them some privacy*. But they understood and also turned away. After a few moments Harry heard something that made him think that Ron might have changed his mind about not letting Hermione near him now that he was a werewolf. There were *definite* kissing noises behind them, a rustling and a sighing....Harry felt himself redden, trying not to think about the way she kissed....

Then he turned, despite his resolve not to, when he heard pounding footsteps and panting; Sirius was running flat-out down the torch-lit corridor. He stopped a few feet away, bending over and trying to get his breath. When he stood and saw Ron and Hermione, his eyes might have fallen from their sockets.

"What the hell?" he said softly. Harry couldn't help turning now; they were still connected, her arms twined around his neck, his hands on her back pressing her to him. His hair seemed to have grown even in the time it had taken for them to walk down from the hospital wing; then Harry glanced at Lupin and saw that his had, too, and his nails as well, which

were looking quite claw-like. Realizing that people were looking at him and Hermione, Ron turned bright red and pulled back from her. She had tears running down her face, staring at him. Then Harry had his breath taken away when she suddenly flung herself at *him*, clasping him tightly but briefly and kissing him on the cheek quickly. Then she put her fist to her mouth to stifle another sob and ran down the corridor toward the stairs, knocking Sirius out of her way as she passed him. He turned to watch her go, then turned back to Ron, his eyes still very wide, his jaw open in disbelief.

Harry didn't feel like explaining to him just now, though. Ginny also looked like she wanted to bawl, but was making a great effort to keep her emotions in hand. She stepped toward her brother and embraced him again, less frantically than in the Apothecary, then kissed his cheek. Then, to Harry's surprise, she turned to him and put her arms around his neck in an almost business-like manner before kissing him quickly on the mouth.

"Thank you for staying with him, Harry," she whispered, her lips still very close to his. "You'll--you'll make certain he doesn't hurt himself? Or you?"

Harry nodded, feeling suddenly the awesome responsibility being laid upon him. He was doing this for his best friend, for Ron, but also for Ginny, and for Hermione, and all of the Weasleys, even the lost sisters who didn't know anything about their real family. As Ginny left, Sirius looked at him with his brow furrowed; Harry wasn't sure there was a way to adequately explain this in front of Ron and Lupin before they had to worry about more pressing, life-and-death concerns (although hopefully, more life than death this evening).

"Remus," Snape said, his voice shaking just a bit as he saw that his colleague was looking more and more unstable. "May I borrow your wand? Mine is--is lost. Pettigrew. I will need it to properly lock you up." Lupin nodded and withdrew his wand for the one man among them who had the most cause to fear werewolves. Harry wondered why he didn't ask Sirius, but then he remembered that Sirius probably didn't have a wand still. Now that he wasn't a fugitive, he could walk into Ollivander's with his head held high and buy himself a new one. Harry smiled to himself at the thought.

Ron seemed to have had a similar thought, because he took out his wand now and handed it to Sirius. "Here," he said. "Since you don't have one. In case of emergency."

"Actually," Lupin said raspily, gazing at his best friend from sunken eyesockets, "speaking of emergencies--did you bring the revolver? And the bullets?"

Sirius shook his head. "This isn't the warehouse, Remus, with those flimsy Muggle walls and doors. This is much more secure. I'm sure that the locks

will hold, and the bar, and Severus no doubt knows some very effective locking charms as well." He nodded at his old nemesis, who nodded back; he looked like he wanted to get this over with. Remus Lupin looked disgruntled, as though he thought his friend was taking a terrible chance not to have the gun with the silver bullets handy, but he didn't say anything more.

Finally, the four of them stepped through the doorway and Sirius and Lupin started to push the heavy door closed, but Lupin's face broke out in a sweat and he had to sit down, so Harry helped Sirius finish closing the door. As he did, he saw Snape's face for a moment in the opening, an expression of concern and doubt visible there, before the metal door slammed shut and they heard the three keys turned in the locks, then the enormous bar being put through the metal supports again. (Snape must be using a levitation charm now, Harry thought.)

They were alone, the four of them. Then suddenly, Harry turned to Sirius; he'd had the thought that Sirius could buy a wand now, but it had only been a thought. In the midst of their preparations and precautions, the fact that there was something to celebrate had been lost. "You're free!" he exclaimed, grinning, throwing himself at him. Sirius hugged him firmly, slapping his back in return, then they both stepped back from each other, looked at their surroundings, and simultaneously laughed uproariously. Lupin and Ron looked at each other, merriment in their eyes, and soon they too couldn't resist laughing at the irony that on his first night as a free man, Sirius Black had volunteered to be locked up in a dungeon.

When the laughter subsided, Lupin wiped the tears from his eyes and checked his watch. "Sunset is in five minutes," he said quietly. Harry and Sirius sat against the wall near the door. Harry watched Ron, who was looking very twitchy and nervous, sitting near one of the piles of hay. After just a few minutes, he rose and began pacing, flexing his hands as they swung by his sides. His red beard was significantly longer than when they'd entered the room. Harry looked at Remus Lupin, who was also sporting a beard now, when he normally appeared clean-shaven or like he had only a slight stubble. *He must use his wand to shave constantly through the day*, Harry thought.

As it grew closer to moonrise, Lupin and Ron looked worse and worse, and Harry began to see a red light in their eyes. He looked at Sirius for some guidance. Finally, his godfather nodded.

"We should change now, Harry." And with that, Harry was no longer looking at Sirius Black, but a large bear-like black dog which he had once been foolish enough to think was a Grim. He executed his own change, and soon he was seeing far better than he had been; the dim light was no problem for his griffin's eyes. He settled down next to Sirius, his front paws neatly arranged before him, looking back and forth between the two men, his teacher and his best friend, who would soon become animals

against their wills, unlike Animagi. It felt like a very long wait, but when it happened, it was quite sudden. Both of them cried out; first they went rigid, then an uncontrollable shaking seized them. Heads and bodies elongated and a dreadful snarling that sounded like a cross between an animal noise and a human scream came from both of them, although Ron was definitely louder, being unused to the transformation. Shoulders hunched and hands curled into paws with long claws. Harry and Sirius saw before them two wolves with ragged grey coats and glowing red eyes, slavering mouths with tongues hanging out, hungry mouths with no food in sight, as the only acceptable food for them this night would be a human being.

Don't change back, Harry reminded himself. No matter how much the scar hurts, if it hurts, don't change back.

He thought Ron's fur looked slightly reddish where the moonlight was hitting it, but it was hard to tell; colors didn't look quite the same to him when he was a griffin. The two wolves paced nervously, sometimes glancing at the dog and what seemed to be a lion, other times eyeing each other warily and snarling threateningly. Harry felt his own hide quivering nervously as he also paced now, his large padded paws silent on the stone flags. He felt like a wire stretched to its breaking point; he'd never been so tense.

Do something already, he thought.

Then, one of them did; Lupin leapt through the air, jaws open, claws extended, as it he attacked Sirius. Harry emitted a deafening ROAR in response to this assault, which echoed off the stone walls with a force and volume for which he was unprepared. The reddish wolf also chose this moment to leap, and Harry reared up on his hind legs, his teeth bared, claws at the ready, roaring again, his animal instincts vibrating through every hair on his hide, as he met the attack by his best friend.

* * * * *

Harry heard voices. He was still in griffin form, and at first it had been difficult to differentiate the low murmurs from his own constantly-purring motor. He opened one eye a crack and saw that it was Ron and Lupin, sitting against a wall. Sirius was curled up on some hay, human again. Ron had his wand (he must have slipped it out of Sirius' pocket) and was shaving. It looked like Lupin had already used it to do this. Then Lupin took the wand from him and cut his hair for him. Ron had some scars on his face and looked like the bridge of his nose had been broken (*Did I do that?* Harry wondered); Lupin was bloodied as well, and yet, even as Harry looked, it seemed that his and Ron's wounds were spontaneously healing. The night was a blur to Harry; there had been so much tumbling and fighting, occasional detentes and then violent resurgences....

Harry didn't let on that he was awake. He was still very tired. Somehow, being in the dungeon reminded him a great deal of being in Azkaban, and he had never been anxious to revert to his human form when he was in prison because of the effect the dementors had on him as a human. There were no dementors here, but he still felt better in his griffin form.

When Ron and Lupin were done with their morning grooming, Ron put the wand away. He rested his forearms on his raised knees and stared into space, looking far older than Harry ever remembered. When Ron grinned, it was still possible to see the twelve-year-old who had helped Harry keep the stone from Voldemort that could make the Elixir of Life. Other times he looked twenty-something. Usually he seemed about his age, somewhere between fifteen and nineteen. Now he looked world-weary and defeated, and Harry noticed something that hadn't been there when the sun had gone down the previous evening: a single lock of grey hair growing from the widow's peak at the top of Ron's forehead, contrasting with his bright red hair. Harry had always wondered why Lupin already had some scattered grey in his light brown hair, when Sirius and Snape, with their black hair, betrayed no such sign of age yet. Now he knew; it was the mark of the wolf.

"She wanted to be with me last night, but McGonagall said she isn't ready yet. If she changed back because she was startled or frightened--well, that would be worse than bad..."

Lupin nodded. "It took Sirius and the others years...."

"When can we start the training you mentioned?" Ron asked him quietly; whether to avoid waking his best friend and Sirius or because his own newly-acute hearing would otherwise make it seem he was shouting, Harry didn't know.

"We can start tomorrow. We still have tonight's full moon to get through. But later today we can do some training I've used to help me treat objects more carefully. I conjured up a number of very delicate glasses, ones which were so thin they would break when most *humans* touched them to pick them up. You will have to learn to pick them up without breaking them. Then, when you have mastered doing that with things that are even more fragile than most items you will come across on a daily basis, you will know that you are not in danger of accidentally smashing the world to bits simply by sitting down at a friend's table to eat dinner."

Ron tried to smile. "Great. This will probably take a while. I wasn't any good at that *before*." Lupin smiled ruefully at him.

"I know this all seems difficult, Ron. And I won't lie to you--there are some things which are going to be particularly difficult for you because you are still a teenager...." Lupin hesitated for a moment, then hurried on. "...with raging hormones...."

Ron grimaced. "Brilliant. As if I don't have enough problems with that." He paused. "As you know, Harry and Hermione aren't together any more." Lupin nodded. "We--we weren't sneaking around, precisely. Hermione and I. We sort of--sort of admitted how we felt about each other and decided that we could wait to be together, since Harry seemed to--to need her so much--" He looked down at his hands. "Or at least *I* admitted how I felt. She didn't admit it until just before--before you bit me. Harry had already broken up with her by then. He--he knew about us, it turns out. He was also hacked off at me for a while because of something I said about the two of them last summer."

"Yes; you mentioned something about that in the infirmary. What was it?"

Ron shook his head. "It was stupid. I'd rather not say. Anyway, I've been going crazy for months, waiting for her or Harry to come to their senses and break up. There were times I thought I might be happy just with a kiss now and then. But I suppose--once we got started, it might have been rather difficult to stop--"

Lupin sighed. "That's nothing compared to how it will be for you now during the twenty-four hours directly preceding the full moon. And it was far, far worse for me when I was a teenager than it is now."

Ron frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I was thirteen, I discovered that during that twenty-four-hour period, suddenly everything--" he paused again and blushed slightly. "Everything aroused me. You name it. Watching paint dry could do it. Looking at grass growing. Even that poor girl--actually I should say woman--who was killed by Voldemort a few years back, Bertha Jorkins. Even--" and he paused again, dropping his voice and looking like he expected Ron to erupt at any moment. "Even other boys," he finally said, eyeing Ron to see what his reaction would be.

"I see." Those were the only words Ron said. It was silent for a long time. Finally Ron asked him, "So did you?"

"Did I what?"

Ron's ears turned pink. "What I mean is, when you felt this way, what did you do about it?"

Lupin nodded. "Well, usually I just plain suffered. Especially at thirteen and fourteen, below the wizarding age of consent. It was pure torture. Then when I was fifteen, I found myself with a--a friend one night before the full moon. A friend who could tell I was feeling very, very aroused. A friend who, it turned out, was not averse to helping me with my little problem....Until I disappeared for three nights running after that. And until I couldn't respond to the words 'I love you,' with the same three words. It

wasn't that I didn't feel them, it was just that--I didn't think I had any right--"

Harry was glad to see, through his slit of an eye opening, that Ron didn't flinch or move away from Lupin upon hearing about this 'friend' who had helped Remus. Who was it? Harry wondered.

"I tried to stop it happening. I went down to the common room that night on purpose, so I wouldn't be in the dormitory with my friends. I did *not* want to attack my best friends just because I was feeling this way. This--friend lived in a different dorm. I told my friend under no uncertain terms to leave me alone--I didn't trust myself. I've done some research; an alarming number of people on the werewolf registry have been charged with rape over the years, rapes that occurred on the day *before* the full moon. I--I did *not* want that to happen. But my friend insisted on staying, and then one thing led to another--"

He sighed. "But when I disappeared for three nights and wouldn't tell her where I'd gone, she became distant. Then the same thing happened the following month. And the month after that, and after that....In between times I adored her from afar, even as I felt I had an obligation to keep her at a distance. She became very frustrated with me. And then," Lupin continued after another pause, "--she started going out with another boy, and I thought *surely* she'd stop helping me. When she didn't, I felt so guilty. I mean, I didn't particularly like him, but I felt so terrible about sleeping with his girlfriend. The problem was, no matter high-minded I was at other times, if she caught me out when it was the day before the full moon, I was helpless to reason...I was just a bundle of hormones and animal instincts...."

"Oh," Ron said. "It was a *girl*."

Lupin smiled. "Yes, in this case it was a girl. Although--when I was out of school, I increasingly found myself in male company during the day before the full moon....Eventually I decided that I'm bisexual. I hope that doesn't shock you, Ron. But that's the real reason I haven't settled down with a wife and kids--or a husband and kids, for that matter. I suppose I just haven't found the woman yet who can get me to completely stop thinking about men, nor the man who can get me to stop thinking about women, and if I ever dedicate my life to someone, I'd like to be able to focus on just that person. Being a werewolf has nothing to do with it."

"Well, so--your being attracted to both men and women before the full moon has nothing to do with being a werewolf?"

"Oh, no, that has everything to do with how I feel at *that* time. I told you, even people I wouldn't normally find attractive are fair game to me then. That's why I was so confused for so long. You could see how easy it would be to confuse my sexual feelings at that time with the sexual feelings I

have in general? Especially when that's when I feel the most stimulated? I had a hell of a time figuring out who I really am."

"I see," Ron said slowly, not sounding like he saw at all.

"Ron, I've heard of heterosexual male werewolves who'll sleep with men, but only just before the full moon, and gay male werewolves who'll sleep with women, but only just before the full moon. I'm telling you, that time of month, it doesn't matter whether you're oriented toward middle-aged accountants with receding hairlines and buck teeth or Nordic blonde models. You'll want to shag anything that moves."

Ron made a face. "Brilliant. That'll make it easy to take it slow with Hermione."

Lupin shrugged. "So we'll make sure you avoid her that day. For one thing, until you've gone through some training with me, you could seriously injure anyone with whom you have sexual relations. You almost put Roger Davies through a stone wall, and you weren't exactly trying to seduce him." Ron guffawed and Lupin laughed as well, but then he stopped himself, glancing at Sirius' sleeping form.

"Control *can* be achieved," he went on, "with a great deal of concentration and self-discipline. I started working out ways of dealing with it when my friend stopped helping me for a while, when she found out I was a werewolf...."

Ron frowned. "Oh. When she--when she started helping you, she didn't know?"

Lupin shook his head. "That's why she was so upset with me for not being able to say those three little words. Although, like I said, I *did* actually feel that way about her. She was wonderful and beautiful and brilliant, and I felt completely unworthy of her, so I purposefully did not say what I knew she wanted to hear, and I refused to tell her where I went when I disappeared each month on the three nights following our sleeping together. Unfortunately, when she started seeing that other boy, she eventually asked *him* to find out where I and my other friends were going on the nights when the moon was full...."

Harry gasped, raising his head. He opened his eyes wide and let himself change into his human form. He lay on the dungeon floor, looking at the amazed Ron Weasley and Remus Lupin.

"It was my mum!" Harry suddenly cried hoarsely. Lupin stared at him, swallowing. Harry remembered Sirius Black's disembodied head in Severus Snape's office fireplace, saying, *You know, we were all in love with her. Even though I--went with other girls. Even Peter, although he*

wouldn't have admitted it. I could see it when he looked at her. Remus, too. And James, naturally...

His mother. It was all falling into place now. At the age of sixteen, when Severus Snape had confessed his love for her aided by the courage afforded him by the Eutharsos Potion, she hadn't been an inexperienced little girl. She'd been sleeping with Remus Lupin once a month for a year, waiting for him to tell her he loved her, and to confess to his monthly activities....When he'd been in the Pensieve he'd heard her say, *How dare you take that--that courage potion and then kiss me! Is that what it takes for a boy to tell me he cares about me and kiss me?* And all this time he'd thought it was the *kiss* his mother had been looking for, someone to notice that she wasn't just a smart, talented witch who was likely on the path toward being Head Girl. It was the *I love you* she was looking for. Harry had been focusing on the wrong thing all this time. That was partly because she'd complained about being treated like a disembodied brain--that was probably in reference to Snape and the other boys she knew, though. It was Remus from whom she wanted to hear the words of caring, the verbal declaration of love to match the physical one.

He thought about his other life, about the way she'd had Lupin move in with them, before the Longbottoms came to take him away. Had she continued to help relieve him once a month? Did her husband know about it? He might have; it might have been something else that he was referring to besides his near-death experience, when he told Frank Longbottom that he of all people was one of the most unlikely protectors of this particular werewolf that could be found. And yet--he *did* protect him, until it was no longer possible. For his wife's sake. Perhaps she decided that Remus didn't feel worthy of her because of his lycanthropy, and she finally accepted that that was how he felt. Harry was very confused. His mother was proving to be an even more complex person than he'd thought, even after he'd gotten to know her better in his other life, even after he finally came to terms with her affair with Sirius and the reasons for her making him think he'd performed poorly on his O.W.L.s.

Remus Lupin looked at him now, very sad and guilty. Harry sat back on his haunches, calmer now. "Why--" he choked. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

Remus grimaced. "Oh, Harry--can you think of a good way to tell you something like that?" Ron snorted for a moment, then sobered when he saw the look on Harry's face.

"No," Harry admitted. "I suppose not."

Ron was very red and Sirius was sitting up now.

"I suppose," Sirius said at last, "it would do no good to pretend I didn't hear any of that?"

Ron started to laugh again and stifled it once more. Harry pictured his mother in his mind when she was young, when she was arguing with Lucius Malfoy at the Christmas party, her eyes flashing; when she was herding the children through Diagon Alley, shopping for their school things, when she was making Christmas cookies in the large kitchen at Hog's End or decorating the house for the holidays....

Then he remembered seeing her again with his father, relaxing by the fire in the cottage in Godric's Hollow, the cozy scene he'd witnessed twice now. "You didn't--she didn't--help you after she was--after she was with my father--?"

Remus opened his eyes wide and abruptly cried, "No!" Then he calmed down. "No, Harry. I--I was very happy for the two of them when they found each other. I had been making her unhappy for years, because I couldn't be what she wanted me to be, and then she jumped at the chance to be with that other boy because he actually told her how he felt about her, but--" He sighed. "I think she was still waiting for me to say it. Waiting for me to show that I was jealous of the other boy--which I was. Incredibly jealous. Finally, she started pressuring James and Sirius to tell her what we were doing every month. She and James had been like sister and brother, and she was very, very upset that he was keeping this from her. I heard them arguing about it; he kept telling her that it wasn't his secret to tell. In the long run, I think she was angrier with *him* for not telling than she was with me. She seemed to think that *he*, of all people, would be honest with her."

I thought we were friends, his mother had said to his father, when they'd had the confrontation in the corridor outside the common room, the one he and Hermione had seen in Snape's Pensieve. Friends. But, he remembered, she had seemed to mean much more by that word than mere "friends." Something bothered Harry.

"So, you didn't continue to sleep with my mother once she was the girlfriend of one of your best friends, but when she was Severus Snape's girlfriend, she was fair game?"

Lupin dropped his jaw. "You know about Snape?"

Harry nodded. "Ron knows too." Ron swallowed and looked at Lupin, smiling feebly and shrugging.

"I forgot I knew. Honestly." Then he turned to Harry. "Are you saying you're upset about *Lupin* carrying on with your mother when they were in school, but you're okay about *Snape*?"

"At least *he* wasn't carrying on with someone he knew was someone else's girlfriend--" he started to say. *And how was that any different from you and Ginny in the forest and in the Astronomy Tower?* his brain replied.

Well, for a start, we didn't sleep together, he rationalized. You would have, his brain argued back, given the opportunity....

Harry shook his head to silence that accusatory voice. He'd accepted that Ginny was Draco Malfoy's girlfriend. He had. He'd gone into the forest to save that git's life. It was different. It was *completely* different.

And yet--somehow he couldn't maintain his enthusiasm for attacking Remus Lupin. In the back of his mind he knew that he hadn't been much better, declaring his love for Ginny multiple times during the year (when he was technically still with Hermione, on top of everything else) and that if he *had* slept with her, he wouldn't have a good excuse like being a werewolf.

He looked at his professor grimly, then stood and put his hand out to the older man. Lupin took his hand and Harry helped him stand. Lupin's grip was very strong, but Harry gave as good as he got. "I'll get over it," he told him tersely.

Lupin nodded at him, then held out his hand and helped Ron to stand. Sirius was also on his feet now. The four of them looked around aimlessly. "Well," Ron said, frowning, "when can we get the hell out of here? I'm starving." He sniffed and looked appraisingly at the other three. "And I think some showers are in order."

Harry hit Ron with the back of his hand, laughing, and Lupin gave his shoulder that squeeze again. "Ron," he said, raising one eyebrow. "I know you can smell, er, a lot of things you *couldn't* before, but you have to restrain yourself from commenting."

Ron grimaced. "So. I have to learn how werewolves pick up delicate objects, how werewolves keep themselves from shagging anything and everything, and on top of that I have to learn werewolf *etiquette*?"

Harry laughed. "Actually, we'd settle for you learning *any* kind of etiquette at all--"

Harry leaped lithely across the cell while Lupin quickly caught Ron around the waist, but all four of them were laughing, and a moment later, they heard a sound in the corridor that encouraged them; the bar was being drawn back from the door. They heard keys turning in the locks, and then the door creaked slowly open. Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking rather amazed to find the occupants of the cell laughing.

Snape raised his eyebrows and looked back and forth between them. "We're in high spirits this morning, aren't we?" he said icily.

Sirius Black sunnily smiled at him. "Good morning, Severus. Lovely day, isn't it?" The four of them looked at each other again, unable to stifle their laughter, and Snape turned away, shaking his head; they were clearly hopeless. Harry didn't say anything to him; he wanted to talk to him very badly, missing the way he had been able to discuss anything with his stepfather in his other life, missing the Severus Snape who hadn't completely lost his sense of humor, but instead he followed Ron and the others out of the dungeon, and sprinted up the stairs to the prefects' bathroom, succeeding, for once, in convincing Ron to use this facility also. He felt bad about avoiding Snape; he had to find time to talk to him eventually. But the time simply hadn't arrived.

* * * * *

The last night of the full moon passed much like the previous night. In the morning, Dumbledore and Snape let them out again and Ron and Harry showered and returned to their dorm for fresh clothes.

Sirius and Ron went to the Ministry of Magic to formally register as an Animagus and werewolf respectively, and Ron stayed the weekend at the Burrow, breaking the news to the rest of the family and explaining why he wasn't pressing charges against Lupin (no one tried to change his mind). Classes resumed, as the end of term was near. No one mentioned Evan Davies, although some of the Ravenclaws wore black armbands under their robes.

Harry was remembering more and more of his sixth year in this life and felt confident that he would pass all of his examinations. MacDermid would finish the term as the Potions Master, but during classes, Harry could see Snape through the open office door, bustling around, putting things back the way he preferred them to be. Harry smiled when he saw this, knowing how particular Snape was about his office. Duncan MacDermid grimaced and tried to ignore his sometimes noisy nephew, which was particularly difficult when Snape was muttering oaths as he worked.

Harry Ron and Hermione had settled into being "just friends" again. Hermione had looked very concerned about Ron after his first night as a werewolf, but Ron talked to Ginny about the "cooling-off" period and Ginny spoke to Hermione, who reluctantly agreed. She didn't give Ron the same sort of send-off on his second "wolf-night," as Ron had already started to call it. Ron and Harry each received identical hugs and cheek-kisses from both Hermione and Ginny, as though Harry and Ron each had two sisters.

Now that he had been back in this life for a little while, he was starting to feel some of the other life slipping away from him, so he began to spend time alone in the dormitory, when he could, putting memories into his Pensieve. Evidently, he'd followed up on the suggestion he'd given himself

on September first, and Sirius had helped him acquire a Pensieve for his own use, which had sat in a box under his bed for months, untouched.

The first time he took out the large stone bowl, he wished he could read the runes written around the edge. Then he looked at them again and realized that he *could* read them; his Ancient Runes classes in his other life popped into his head and he ran fingers over the characters, muttering the translation of the words under his breath:

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world.

How odd, thought Harry, that the runes of the Pensieve should say this. After a moment, he realized with a shock that he'd read Sanskrit. Then he saw that there were Nordic runes, and he could read these, too. They said exactly the same thing. He turned the bowl; the ancient Greek characters said the same thing, so simply assumed that the Chinese pictograms communicated the same message. He hadn't taken seventh-year Ancient Runes in his other life, when he would have received a rudimentary knowledge of how to read these.

He checked the instructions, which fortunately, were in English. He sat before the bowl, trying to be as calm as possible. He put his wand near his head, then he chose a thought, a memory, to preserve. He placed his wand against his temple, then he lowered his wand to the bowl, and a silvery thread now connected his temple to his wand. The tread dipped and the strange material sank into the empty bowl. He swirled the contents slightly with his wand, even as the thought continued to flow from his mind. Then, with a *plop!* the silver strand fell from him and the complete thought was now in the glutinous contents of the Pensieve. There being only one thought, one memory in the bowl, Harry had to bend over to see the small, shallow puddle he'd created at the bottom. He put his wand in it again, stirring, until it seemed that he was looked through the lens of a camera that was mounted on the ceiling of a room. As when he'd been looking into Dumbledore's Pensieve, it was slightly disorienting to be looking into a rectilinear room through a round opening. The room he was looking into was very familiar: his bedroom at Hog's End. He could see a small boy with very messy black hair sitting up in a rather large bed. Harry smiled. It had worked!

He put his wand to his temple again after he had decided on another memory. Day after day, the contents of the Pensieve grew. He went about his daily routine, running, going to classes, spending time with Ron and Hermione (both boys were trying to avoid being alone with her) and preparing for the final Quidditch match of the year, between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Still, he made certain that he found time each day to use the Pensieve.

On the day before the match, Harry put a memory in the Pensieve of the Quidditch match that had led to his being named the Slytherin captain in his other life. He was looking for some inspiration. Ron had been running them ragged during practices, having, it seemed, no limit to his stamina now. At the end of three hours of flying, he was still as energetic as ever, while everyone else was positively wilting. Still, the training seemed to be paying off. Ginny was able to keep everything out of the goals (as long as it wasn't a Quaffle fired off by her brother); Dean and Neville were terrors with their Bludger bats, and the combination of Ron, Tony and Katie working with the Quaffle was a very strong one. Harry, of course, was still Seeker. He cast his mind back to the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw matches they'd already played. They had won three-hundred and ten to nothing and two-hundred and thirty to nothing. Not only were they undefeated, no one had even scored on them, and that was *before* Ron was a werewolf.

Harry smiled to himself as he donned his Quidditch robes in the changing rooms. He glanced at Ron. Ron was looking very powerful indeed. He'd been going on daily runs since September and Harry had noticed Hermione and Annika stealing looks at him more than once when he'd removed his shirt to exercise during the warm weather. The wolf in him had taken it up a notch, and now when he removed his shirt to exercise, all three girls who were not his sisters gawped at him, and even Ginny opened her eyes wide in surprise. Draco Malfoy, Harry noted, did not seem to appreciate Mariah Kirkner noticing Ron. She positively *purred* at him when she ran into him after that. Annika had never been subtle about her attraction to him, ever since she'd started pursuing him at Ruth Pelta's bat mitzvah the previous summer, and, if possible, now that he was stronger and more muscular, she brought "not subtle" to a new low (or a new high--Harry hadn't decided). Hermione was very cold to Annika and Mariah. Ginny rolled her eyes at the three of them.

Ron was a demon with the Quaffle, sending it hurtling through the goals too fast to see when they were practicing. Sometimes during practice Harry would swap with Ginny and play Keeper while she played Seeker. He and Ginny both had about the same success rate at stopping the Quaffles hurled by Ron (one in ten).

On the day of the match, Harry finished his preparations and stepped into the meeting room where Ron was going to talk to them. He looked around, then sank onto one of the couches, feeling as though he'd received a kind of psychic shock. It was the first time he'd been in here since fixing the timelines. This was where he and Ginny--

He turned his head, shocked to find her sitting next to him on the couch. Suddenly he saw her in his mind's eye, not in her Quidditch robes, but standing under the shower, the water running over her body; then he saw her lying on top of him, her skin kissing his....

He swallowed and felt a warmth move up from his neck. But he couldn't look away from her. In any life, Ginny's eyes were still Ginny's eyes, and he felt himself drowning in them now as he remembered her, and as he remembered the pain in his gut when he found out that there was never going to be a child, their child, the palpable feeling of loss, just as thought he'd held their child in his arms and had it yanked away from him....

"Harry!"

He jerked his head up. Ron was glowering at him. "Are you okay? How do you expect to find the Snitch if you let your mind wander? Do I need to put Ginny on Seeker and you on Keeper?"

Harry glanced furtively at her for a moment, then thought of Draco Malfoy playing Seeker for Slytherin.

"No," he said in a firm, clear voice. "I'm ready." He looked Ron in the eye. His best friend nodded.

"Good. Let's go!"

When the teams appeared on the pitch, brooms in hand, the crowd roared deafeningly. Harry grinned at the person nearest him, who turned out to be Tony Perugia. Tony glanced up into the stands and--Harry thought--caught Ruth Pelta's eye. Then he grinned at Harry again. Harry felt the excitement in his stomach as the crowd slowly settled down. In the middle of the pitch, Ron and Draco Malfoy shook hands grimly, then fifteen broomsticks rose into the air when Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the game began.

Harry was still getting the hang of his new broom, which Sirius had purchased with money from Harry's Gringott's vault. It was a Firebolt Excelsior, and sometimes it was just a little *too* responsive. It felt like a large, strong dog on a thin, weak leash. Harry was never quite sure where he was going to end up when he was riding it.

He flew in circles near the Gryffindor goals, where Ginny also hovered, bored to tears. Ron had just scored again, followed in quick succession by a goal from Tony, another from Ron, then Katie....

Harry grinned at her. "well, the three of them certainly make your job easy," he said lightly. Ginny raised one eyebrow and spoke to him with a chill in her voice.

"Are you implying that I couldn't stop a Slytherin attempt to score?"

"*And it's Gryffindor ONE HUNDRED, Slytherin NOTHING!*" cried Seamus Finnigan hoarsely.

"Certainly not!" he countered quickly. "I was complimenting our Chasers, not insulting you." Suddenly, her scowl was replaced by a sunny grin.

"Oh, Harry! Can't you take a joke?" she laughed. He smiled back at her.

"Of course I can." He remembered then how she was looking at him when they'd been sitting on the couch before the game. He knew why *he* was looking at *her*, but why had *she* been looking at *him*?

"So," he said, trying to sound light again, "how's everything with you and Malfoy?"

"AND ANOTHER GRYFFINDOR GOAL!"

She colored suddenly and glanced at the Slytherin Seeker with undisguised ardor. "Oh," she said dreamily, "we're just fine."

Harry swallowed and felt his stomach clench. *Get over her*, he commanded himself. *They're together. They're a couple.*

"Oh! Harry!" she cried suddenly, pointing. Seamus was announcing *another* ten points for Gryffindor as Harry dove toward the Snitch, near the ground at the edge of the middle of the pitch. He reached out and plucked it from the air, then held it up, grinning at the screaming crowd, and all the while, never feeling emptier inside.

* * * * *

A few days before the match, Ron and Lupin had begun taking the Wolfsbane Potion in preparation for the full moon a couple of days later. During the day before the full moon, Dumbledore excused Ron from classes and Harry locked him into Fluffy's old lair with a food supply, candles and a dose of Wolfsbane Potion, but no wand, so he couldn't attempt to break the locking charm Harry put on the door.

After classes that day, Harry felt at loose ends. He didn't want to spend time with Hermione, and then when he changed his mind, he discovered she wasn't available, but had evidently gone to McGonagall's office for some reason. He sat on his bed in the empty dorm feeling at loose ends, when finally, he decided to get out his Pensieve and add to it. But then, when he pulled it out, he put his wand into it, swirling it until he saw Severus Snape, standing in the front hall of their house, standing toe-to-toe with Frank Longbottom. Harry's heart swelled with pride, looking down at him.

He missed his dad.

After some hesitation, he decided to finally do it. If he didn't do it before the end of term, he'd never get up the courage. He picked up the Pensieve

and carefully carried it down the spiral stairs and through the common room (no one paid him any mind), then down the many stairs to the dungeons.

Professor MacDermid was not in the room when Harry entered. He went through to the office, whose door was slightly ajar. Harry pushed it open with his elbow, not bothering to ask permission to enter. Snape was sitting at the desk, leaning over one of the drawers, as though sorting through files. He jerked his head up when Harry entered.

Harry carried his Pensieve into the room and sat it down on the desk with a *thunk*, and then he sat down in the chair by the fire and looked at Severus Snape. Snape looked at the Pensieve briefly; the act of moving it had made the silvery-white liquid in it slosh about, and before sitting, Harry glimpsed some wispy human figures drifting around in its viscous depths, and he knew his professor had seen them, too. Then his eyes met Harry's again, but he remained silent. Harry ached to see how sunken his eyes were and wondered how the man had sustained himself during the long months when he was being held prisoner and tortured by Peter Pettigrew and Viktor Krum.

Finally, he pulled open a drawer and took out a small glass. Opening another drawer, he took out his whiskey bottle. His uncle hadn't disturbed it during his tenure, evidently. He didn't make a move to share with Harry this time; there was no second glass being produced. After he drained the glass and gasped softly, pulling his lips back from his teeth briefly, he looked at the silent, obviously-distressed boy before him and said, "Why are you here, Potter? And why did you bring *that*?"

Harry swallowed; he was suddenly remembering so much, things he hadn't put in the Pensieve, little things from his childhood in Hogsmeade, or that simple camaraderie he'd experienced in his other life when he and his dad were playing chess in the Dark Arts office, or when he came into his dorm after that marathon Quidditch match and told Harry the Slytherin team had chosen him to be their new captain....

"I've missed you," he choked out finally, blinking back his tears. Snape was clearly alarmed by the display of emotion. The older man sat silent, contemplating his empty glass.

"I am your teacher," he stated, as though Harry had forgotten this, "and I have been away. I--I have missed teaching." He behaved as though this was an admission of monumental proportions.

"It's not as a teacher I've missed you," Harry said, then realized that that sounded very odd. There was some more awkward silence between them before Harry finally said, "It's as my dad that I've missed you." Snape's eyes opened very wide then, but he didn't speak. "Let me explain," Harry said as soon as he saw that reaction. He explained about the not-sleeping

during the previous summer, due to the dreams brought on by his scar; he explained about Voldemort talking to him using the *Tempus Fugit* spell at King's Cross, about the clock Portkey, about performing the *Tempus Bonae Voluntatis* spell....

Severus Snape bounded from his chair; Harry sank back into his, thinking he was going to physically attack him. "You did *what*?"

Harry gazed up at him, a feeling of deep shame coming over him. "Dumbledore knows. I told him in October. Except that I only knew that I'd done it then. I didn't actually remember the other life until the night of May fourteenth, which is when I fixed the timelines....

"I--I just wanted to save my mother. And sister. And--and it worked. When I woke up--I had this other life that I'd lived in for over fifteen years. My mum hadn't died. We lived in a house in Hogsmeade. I had a sister named Jamie. Two little brothers who were twins..."

Snape frowned and sat again, perplexed. "Little brothers?"

Harry nodded. "My mum had remarried. My little brothers were named Stuart and Simon--" Harry paused, uncertain. Then, he plunged on quickly before he could lose his nerve. "Snape."

The older man frowned. "I know students do it all the time, but it is more appropriate to call a professor 'Professor' to his face, not just use his surname--"

"No. I meant--my brothers' names were Stuart Snape and Simon Snape. You were my stepfather. You married my mother. I said I missed you because--because you raised me. You're the only father I've ever known."

Snape's eyes goggled at Harry and he tried to pour another drink with a shaking hand, sloshing the smelly alcohol onto his desk instead. He ignored the mess and brought the glass to his lips with what he'd managed to get inside it, draining it once more and then looking at the Pensieve out of the corner of his eye.

"Why should I believe you?" he said suddenly. "If you had a life like that, with your mother and--and a family, why did you change everything?"

Harry frowned. "Because it was wrong. But I couldn't see how wrong until--until it went all wrong for *me*...."

Snape looked at him through narrowed eyes. "What do you mean?"

"What--how it went wrong for me, or the rest of the world? It's hard to know where to start. Voldemort didn't fall, for a start. That's bad enough. The school banned Muggle-born students when I was about seven or

eight..." Harry ran through some of the differences in the wizarding world, then the Muggle world.

"And none of that was enough? You needed your own life to be a disaster before you deigned to do anything?" Harry squirmed, feeling properly chastised. "How *did* your life go wrong? What happened to make you do the right thing?" Snape looked genuinely curious.

Harry hesitated. How could he tell this man that he'd contributed to the death of the woman he'd loved? One thing Harry had *not* put into the Pensieve was his mother's death in the cave. He cleared his throat. "Well, for a start, in order to fix things, I had to escape from Azkaban."

"*Azkaban!*" Snape breathed out the word as though it was the most profane utterance in the English language. "*You* went to *prison*? Why?"

Harry looked down. "I--I don't want to talk about it." He looked up and was surprised to find sympathy in his professor's face. "Please."

Considering this for a few moments, Snape finally closed his eyes and nodded.

"And even though everything went to hell," Harry went on, "and I knew it was the right thing to change it back if I could, it was so hard--so hard not to have a family any more. Except--by the time I fixed it, you were just about the only family I had left."

Now Snape actually looked distressed, in spite of himself. "Did they--did they all turn their backs on you because of--whatever you did to get sent to prison?" The idea clearly appalled him. He was no fan of Sirius Black's when he'd encountered him in the Shrieking Shack in Harry's third year, but he would naturally expect the family of the convicted to stand by him.

"They weren't around to turn their backs on me," he said quietly. "They were all dead." Harry didn't feel like explaining Simon's fate to his erstwhile father; it was simpler to think of him as dead. And now he would never be born, nor his twin....

Snape stood up again, but this time he paced the floor, shaking his head. "I do not believe this. You--lived another life. For fifteen years. And then you changed the timelines back." He glanced at the Pensieve on the desk. "And you put your memories from that other life in there?"

"Some of them. I know--I know you never married and had children. Not that you still couldn't. But--" Harry felt bashful of this suddenly. "I thought you should know--you were a good dad. The only dad I ever knew. For some reason I--I thought I'd show you that, but now I can see it was a bad idea--"

He went to the desk and started to pick up the Pensieve, but Snape put his hand on his arm. Harry stared down at the hand, then up at his professor. The hand was removed and Severus Snape cleared his throat, trying to look as though he were glancing carelessly toward the Pensieve when he seemed quite intent in making out the human figures seen floating past every so often.

"What--what is in it?"

Harry thought about this. "A holiday by the seaside. You and the twins spent most of the time on the beach under a canopy we erected to protect the three of you from the sun--" Harry saw him frowning, then explained, "Stu and Si had Porphyria, too. And Draco was with us, visiting." Now Snape's eyebrows flew up in surprise. Harry drew his mouth into a line. "We were best mates from when we were very small. You continued to spy for Dumbledore and you and Mum were friends with the Malfoys, as a kind of cover."

Snape looked toward the Pensieve again. "What else?"

Harry thought. "Well--Stuart's funeral. The graveyard, in Dunoon. Just a short bit." His eyes started to water again as he thought about it. "And you and me and the twins practicing Quidditch at home. And--and one night from when I was wee and Mum was still expecting the twins--" He stopped, seeing that Snape was twisting his mouth in amusement when Harry let the "wee" slip. Harry grimaced. "Well, do you want to see or not? You seem to believe me now--if you want further proof, it's right here," he said, nodding down at the large stone bowl.

Snape leaned over it, frowning. "Only true memories can be put in a Pensieve, not fantasies or dreams," he stated, as if to reassure himself.

"That's right," Harry confirmed. "Although, of course, memories are still biased. It's how *I* experienced those events. It's not completely objective, like things being captured on film." He stopped and began to explain, "*Film* is--"

"I know what *film* is, Potter," Snape shot back with a scowl. "I may live in the wizarding world, but I am not an ignoramus with no knowledge of Muggle entertainments."

Harry nodded down at the Pensieve again. "So--?"

Snape looked like he was getting up his nerve, looking into the bowl again. Then he nodded, almost imperceptibly. They each took out their wands; Harry went first. He bent over, touching the surface with his wand, stirring the contents until he saw a sunny beach; a pretty red-haired woman reclining on a canvas *chaise longue* was wearing a deep blue one-piece bathing suit, her face protected from the sun by a large floppy hat

and sunglasses, while a dark-haired boy and girl worked nearby on a sand castle....

Harry bent over, putting his nose to the liquid surface, feeling his stomach jolt within him as he tumbled into the Pensieve. A moment later, he was landing on the sand near the red-haired woman, and then, without warning, Severus Snape seemed to fall out of the sky and onto the sand beside him.

He squinted and looked alarmed at being in such bright sunlight, but Harry quickly reassured him, "You can't get hurt by this sun. It's just a memory." The older man nodded, as though he was feeling a trifle foolish for panicking, however briefly. He looked around at the other people populating the beach, then back at Lily Evans, who was about twenty-eight at the time, and as beautiful as Harry remembered her. She was reading a novel while she relaxed in the sun, her two eldest children playing in the sand nearby.

Snape knelt near Lily, peering at her novel, trying to fathom her expression. Harry also watched her, wondering again whether children, when they're growing up, ever take the time to really look at their parents and imprint them on their memories against the day when they no longer have them....

But Snape, fascinated, had moved to the boy and girl working on the sand castle. At the age of eight, Harry was a thin, wiry-looking child with James Potter's characteristic messy black hair and his mother's green eyes, which were as yet unobscured by glasses. Unlike the boy who had grown up with the Dursleys, he wasn't pale and sickly-looking from living under the stairs and being fed next-to-nothing; while this boy was on the thin side, he was clearly in good health and had acquired a tan from being on the beach.

His sister was six, with thin but sturdy-looking arms and legs protruding from her violently pink bathing suit, ornamented by extraneous ruffles around the leg openings and on the shoulder straps. Her dark hair was pulled into two braids and her eyes were as green as her brother's. She was tan also, with some freckles scattered across her nose. Wet sand was sticking to their legs as they worked; they were pouring water into the moat they'd dug around their castle.

"Wanna go swimming?" young Harry asked Jamie suddenly in a high, piping voice that nearly made Snape guffaw. He looked at his teacher, frowning.

"I was only eight." He knew he sounded defensive.

"Did I say anything?" Snape said, his eyebrows raised. Now Harry wanted to laugh; it was almost like when he'd talked to his stepfather in his old

life, when they could joke with each other and tell each other anything and everything.

Jamie shrugged and said, "Sure. Do you think Dad's done with Draco? Maybe he'd like to come, too."

"Let's go see."

They followed the children under the open-sided canopy where the twenty-eight-year-old Severus Snape was sheltered from the sun, along with his twin sons. The four-year-olds were digging in the cool, shaded sand, sifting it through a metal pail that had perforations for just that purpose. Their father was using his wand to discreetly mend a small cut on Draco Malfoy's shin. The small, thin blond boy had telltale streaks from tears running down his face. He was as tan as young Harry and Jamie, save for the small white scar that betrayed the healed wound on his leg.

"Can Draco come in the water yet, Dad?" Harry asked his stepfather. His stepfather didn't look up from his task, but continued concentrating very hard on what he was doing. After a half-minute, he looked up and smiled at his stepson.

"That should do it. No salt water can get in now. Mind where you step. You don't want me to have to fix a cut from another sharp shell." He turned to young Harry now. "Why don't you ask your mother to go with you?"

Harry smiled brilliantly at his stepfather. "Right!" The three of them ran back to Lily Evans.

"Mum!" Harry cried. "Come in the water with us!"

"Please please please please...." Jamie began chanting immediately in a sing-song voice. Her mother laughed and took off her sunglasses.

"All right, all right. Tell you what, you three start down, I'll follow."

The children turned and ran toward the water hand in hand, Jamie between the two boys, the sun glinting off their hair, their legs long and thin and athletic. Harry caught his breath, watching them. They were such beautiful children; they had no idea how they looked to others, how it was possible for one of them, nine years later, to feel tears prickle against his eyelids just from seeing his younger self and his sister and best friend run toward the sea holding hands and laughing innocently.

Lily Evans took off her hat and laid it carefully on the chair with her book and sunglasses, then took off her sand shoes and placed them meticulously under the chair. Her hair was already pulled into a long braid down her back. As she walked decorously down to the sea, Harry watched

the Severus Snape beside him follow her hungrily with his eyes. When she reached the water, however, she left her decorum behind to play with the children. They had leapt recklessly into the waves when they'd reached the water's edge, and now Jamie was rubbing her eyes and whimpering about salt water in them, so her mother picked her up and carried her piggy-back, stepping through the thigh-high (for her) water with the girl's thin, tanned legs wrapped around her waist and the wiry arms clasped around her neck. Harry and Draco were splashing each other, laughing hysterically, and every so often, Lily bent her knees, getting Jamie wet, making her squeal with delight.

The sun moved behind some clouds and the beach became very grey. Rather than this putting a damper on the day's activities, however, it simply meant that more people could participate. "Dad!" Harry yelled from the water. "Bring the twins! The sun's gone in!"

They saw the younger Severus Snape raise his hand and wave at his stepson, then hold out his hands for the four-year-olds, who looked very eager to get out from under the canopy and into the water. Their father was pale and thin but muscular, with what appeared to be a tattoo on his left forearm. His hair was long at this point, pulled into a pony tail at the nape of his neck, but he was clean-shaven. He grinned, which emphasized his high cheekbones and made him look like a totally different person than the tortured man standing next to Harry, observing a life he had never known, a life where he frolicked in the sea with his wife and children, a life where he *had* children. The seven of them splashed in the water with abandon, and finally, they saw Severus Snape snake his arms around his wife's waist and press his lips to her neck. She smiled knowingly at him and blushed through her tan, while the children, noticing that the adults had a semi-private moment, put a stop to that almost instantly by starting the splashing again. This time, Jamie was going at it as adamantly as her brothers and Draco Malfoy.

They were all laughing hysterically, and Harry remembered that on that day, his face had actually *hurt* from laughing so hard and so long. He looked at professor; the sad expression he wore made Harry wonder whether this had been a good idea.

"Do you--do you want to go, sir?" he asked softly. Snape turned his head sharply.

"No."

Harry furrowed his brow slightly. The older man turned back to watching the family that wasn't his making their way back to the blankets and canopy. The twins were attached to their father, one small thin boy on each hip, while Jamie was on her mother's back again, her head pillowled on her mother's shoulder; the six-year-old looked like she might need a nap. Harry and Draco had some shells in their hands they'd found; they

were examining them and arguing about what creatures used to live in the delicate creations.

But in spite of Snape's insistence that he didn't want to go, suddenly they had no choice, as grey swirling fog surrounded them. When their feet were on solid ground again, Harry recognized the memory he'd put in the Pensieve of his stepfather practicing Quidditch with his sons and stepson while Jamie looked on. They were on in the field next to their house, none of them old enough for Hogwarts yet. Harry was closest, being now about ten years old.

"You trained me to be a Keeper," he told his teacher quietly as they watched. "I was made the Slytherin captain when I was a fourth year, youngest one ever."

Now Snape stared at Harry. "*Slytherin?*"

Harry nodded. "When I started Hogwarts after living with the Dursleys all my life, Hagrid told me that every dark witch or wizard had come from Slytherin. When I put the hat on, it wanted to put *me* in Slytherin, but I didn't want to be there because of what he'd told me, so I was put in Gryffindor. But in my other life....Draco was my best friend, and he was already in Slytherin, and my stepfather was head-of-house. The hat there gave me a choice, too, and that time I chose Slytherin."

He glanced up at the older man placidly. He'd never before seen Severus Snape at a loss for words. They both turned back to the Quidditch practice, which wasn't an extraordinary event, just a nice, typical one, a father and his children....

Soon they were surrounded by swirling fog again. This time they were in a graveyard on a cold winter's day, and the sound of a lone piper playing Amazing Grace cut the cold air painfully. There was a small procession of mourners, and a coffin being carried on the shoulders of Simon Snape, Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter, Severus Snape, Duncan MacDermid and Sirius Black. Lily Evans and Jamie Potter walked hand in hand, each in black with lengths of tartan around their shoulders; MacGregor for the daughter, in honor of her father, Campbell for the mother, in honor of her current husband.

"*My son,*" Harry heard him say softly beside him as they watched. It took Harry a moment to realize that he meant the son he had left, Simon, not Stuart. He was gazing at his son as the boy carried his twin's coffin, and Harry was startled to see how very much like his father Simon looked, even at the age of twelve. When Jamie stepped forward to sing, Snape shook his head in amazement. "That girl...."

"You were a good dad to her," he said firmly, above the singing. He explained how he'd been on hand for her birth, how he and Lily Evans had

become close again after that, how he'd always thought of Jamie as his very own daughter. "When you'd heard that Draco had become her boyfriend, you had a fit."

Snape frowned. "But he was your friend. Why should that upset me?"

Harry hemmed and hawed a bit. "Well--in my other life, Draco Malfoy had a bit of a reputation with girls..."

Snape nodded now. "I see. Well. I was right to have a fit, then. She was--" his voice caught. "--my daughter."

Harry could hear the tears in his voice, but then the swirling greyness overcame them again and they were standing in Harry's bedroom in Hog's End in Hogsmeade. He was small again, smaller even than in the first memory. He wasn't quite four years old yet, sitting up in the middle of a bed far too large for him and crying out, "Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!" as though he were terrified to his core. At length someone opened the door and magicked the candles to life, shedding a golden glow on a room any small boy would have loved, with both Muggle and wizarding toys on the shelves, a rug designed to look like a map of Hogsmeade, complete with tracks for the Hogwarts Express, and a bookcase full of books that looked well-loved and much-read. A younger Severus Snape went to the bed and sat down nervously; at this point he hadn't been a stepfather for very long, and the boy had been calling for his mother, not the man she'd married.

"Where's Mummy?" the small boy demanded to know. The man smoothed down the unruly black hair springing messily over the boy's head, but the cowlick in the back shot up again stubbornly.

"Mummy's not feeling very well. The babies are kicking her quite a lot. It's very uncomfortable for her when that happens. With two of them, she doesn't get much rest from it."

Little Harry settled back against his pillows, his vivid green eyes clouded by what looked like jealousy. "She's having boys?" he asked softly.

His stepfather nodded. "That's what the midwife said. Twin boys. You and Jamie will have two little brothers to play with." He tried to sound upbeat, since it was evident that the black-haired boy wasn't thrilled with this development. Suddenly he lifted his eyes to the man sitting beside him, glistening with tears.

"Well, then you'll have some boys of your own...." he said thickly before hiccupping loudly and sniffing even more loudly. The older man frowned, then looked understanding and concerned.

"Harry--you don't think--I mean, when the babies are born--you don't think--"

Helplessly, he looked down at the boy who was sure he was about to be abandoned, and suddenly little Harry found himself being embraced by his mother's new husband, who looked mortified that he could have made the boy feel unwanted.

"Oh, Harry, it doesn't matter about the babies. Yes, they'll be my sons. But--but you know that you'll always be my boy, don't you?"

He looked down at Harry earnestly. Harry's lip trembled as he looked back up at his stepfather. "I will?" his little voice piped.

Severus Snape laughed. "Of course you will! I'm your dad now, remember?"

Harry smiled through his tears, nodding and clearly trying to look brave.

"So, are you all right now? Because I told your mum I'd give her a little foot-rub to take her mind off the babies kicking."

"Can I--can I come say goodnight to Mummy?"

"Again?" But a second later, his stepfather relented. "All right, all right. Come on." He picked the small boy up easily and carried him on his hip out of the room. Harry and his teacher followed the young man carrying the boy, going down the corridor to a large comfortable bedroom with a wide bed holding a very pregnant and cross-looking Lily Evans. She did not look happy to see Harry.

"Oh, Harry! You should be asleep by now! Severus, you should have left him in his bed..."

Her husband smiled ruefully. "Now, Lily, he was crying out for you and just wanted to say goodnight. I knew you weren't feeling able to go to him, so I brought him to you."

Harry wriggled out of his grasp and crawled onto the bed, putting his arms around his mother's neck and kissing her cheek. "Goodnight, Mummy. I promise I'll stay in bed after this."

She lost her sternness at the contrite tone in his voice, smiling indulgently and putting her arms around him, kissing him thoroughly on his brow, each check and the tip of his nose.

"Good night my little lion cub," she whispered to him as he grinned back at her, and then his stepfather collected him and carried him out of the room on his hip again. Harry and Snape were forced to follow, and back in

Harry's room, the small boy was tucked into bed with what looked like a stuffed Eeyore and his stepfather stood in the doorway gazing at him for a moment before leaving.

Harry put his hand to his professor's elbow and said simply, "Come on."

Harry felt himself rising, rising, then turning a somersault in the air, until he was landing clumsily back in the office of the Potions Master, stumbling only for a moment. Snape landed next to him, no awkwardness at all. The older man wouldn't look at him, but walked around the desk and sat, staring into the fire. Harry didn't move, but waited for instructions. At last the man lifted his head and said quietly. "I think you should take that back to your dormitory." He nodded at the Pensieve. That was all. Harry saw Snape swallow and look into the flames again. He wasn't going to talk about it right now--if ever. Harry nodded and picked up the Pensieve and left.

* * * * *

Ron and Lupin didn't require company during the full moon this time, but Sirius and Harry opted to stay with them anyway. In contrast to the previous month, having taken the potion during the entire previous week, they were docile and calm, like rather large shaggy dogs, and laid down on the floor of the cell to have a nice sleep. Harry almost didn't see the point of remaining in his griffin form overnight, but he did anyway, waiting until he saw Ron and Lupin in human form in the morning to change back.

The final prefects' meeting was held. When Harry and Hermione arrived, they were surprised to find all of the other prefects looking like they'd already been there for a while. The moment they entered, the others stood and applauded. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, baffled. Cho walked over to them, very solemn-looking, and hugged Harry, saying softly, "You two have been elected Head Boy and Girl by a unanimous vote. The meeting actually started fifteen minutes ago." Then she hugged Hermione and whispered to her. Hermione backed up and put her hand over her mouth, looking both shocked (Harry didn't know why) and thrilled. She beamed at Harry and he smiled back at her, feeling empty inside again. *Ron should be Head Boy*, he thought. But unlike the Ron in his other life, for whom that was a possibility, this Ron hadn't been a prefect for two years, like Harry, and so he wasn't eligible. And in the current climate, no one was going to elect a Slytherin, even if Draco Malfoy had ten Death Eater relatives he could put in prison. Harry looked at Malfoy, sitting between Mariah Kirkner and Millicent Bulstrode. He was clapping as earnestly as anyone else, looking at Harry without a hint of irony. The only thing left was for the teachers to weigh in, and it seemed unlikely that they would choose someone other than Harry and Hermione. As such, it wouldn't be official until the letters were sent out with the other new prefect appointments, but to all intents and purposes, Harry and Hermione were the new Head Boy and Girl.

Harry looked at Hermione; he was happy for her. It was the logical outcome of her years of hard work and the times she'd bravely leaped into the breach to help him....But he remembered a year ago that he'd thought, during the previous election, that if he and Hermione were elected, it would be like his parents, who were also Head Boy and Girl....

Ron was clearly finding it very hard not to react strongly to Hermione's honor when they returned to the common room. He grinned at her and picked her up and twirled her, but they *really* looked like they wanted a few moments alone, which they could *not* afford to do if they were going to maintain their we're-just-friends-for-now stand. Instead, they backed up from each other awkwardly, both looking a little flushed, and Harry felt dreadful. *They should at least be able to celebrate this with a little snogging*, he thought. But the three of them stood together uncomfortably for a few moments before Ginny and Tony returned to the common room. Tony hugged Hermione and he pumped Harry's hand. Ginny also hugged Harry briefly and he forced himself to let her go afterward.

The fifth years took their O.W.L.s and Ginny got twelve, like Percy and Bill. She was thrilled, and immediately owled her parents, sending them the letter she'd received. Then she raced over to the Slytherin table to tell Draco Malfoy, and the two of them went running from the Great Hall, presumably to celebrate. Harry swallowed, watching them. He wandered aimlessly up and down corridors and staircases afterward, finally sitting on some steps which seemed to lead nowhere. He idly fingered his basilisk amulet, then desperately wrapped his hand around it, feeling lost....

He closed his eyes and saw Ginny in his mind's eye. But she wasn't alone. From what he could see, she was on the floor of one of the greenhouses, on some robes that had been thrown down carelessly. And she wasn't alone. She was in Draco Malfoy's arms. Harry could see those arms completely, and also the dragon tattoo that covered his back and shoulders, for his shirt was off. They were kissing deeply, and then Ginny backed up from him, looking at him intently, her eyes dark with passion, and then her fingers went to the buttons of her blouse and she began to unfasten them....

Not him. He wasn't the one unbuttoning her blouse. She was.

Harry clutched the amulet convulsively, seeing her slip her blouse from her shoulders, seeing Draco Malfoy descend hungrily on her neck and then move his mouth down, as she threw her head back and closed her eyes....

With a jerk, Harry ripped the amulet from his neck, breaking the chain. He dropped the amulet in his lap, tears rolling down his face. Then he picked it up by the chain, as though touching the amulet again would burn him, as it had burned Lupin. He walked back to Gryffindor Tower holding the amulet out from him in this way, ignoring the puzzled looks he received from people he saw on the way, and when he was back in his dorm, he

opened his trunk and lowered the amulet into it, letting it fall next to the other amulet which Ginny hadn't let him give her at Christmas. Closing the trunk, he felt as though he were truly closing the door on a chapter of his life. Well, he thought, now he knew. He knew how Ginny felt all those years when she'd been yearning after him with no response. Perhaps it was his comeuppance. Perhaps he deserved it. But knowing that didn't make it any easier....

Somehow, he managed to get through the exams the professors had set for the sixth-year students, even though his heart wasn't in it. The Dueling Exhibition they were going to have had been canceled, because of the previous month's activities in the forest, and before they knew it, they were all packed for the train and preparing to go down to the Great Hall for the leaving feast.

This year there was no mystery and it was no contest. Gryffindor, in addition to winning the Quidditch Cup, had far and away the most house points and had won the House Cup without contest. The hall was draped in red and gold and Harry's heart swelled to see it, realizing that after this, he would have only one more leaving feast, his last. After everyone had finished their meal, Dumbledore stood to speak.

"Congratulations to all of you for your fine performance on your examinations. In spite of numerous distractions both within these walls and without, you have all executed your scholarly tasks admirably." He twinkled at them all, and yet, he seemed more subdued than in the past. "Sadly, some of you have suffered losses which will change your lives forever, but you should know that you always have a family here, that you are always welcome here. Nothing will ever change that." Harry saw him look kindly at Jules Quinn, newly orphaned, and he also saw him glance at a crying third-year Hufflepuff girl and a fourth-year Ravenclaw boy. The Death Eaters had been busy.

"One loss suffered by Ravenclaw House shall not be ignored: Evan Davies." He paused, and the silence in the hall was complete and utter; no one moved a muscle. "Many of you have probably heard," he went on, "that Evan turned on his fellow students, that he attacked your Head Girl, Cho Chang, as well as Ron Weasley and Harry Potter. Sadly, I must say that these things are true. Before his death, Evan did evidently do these things of his own volition, and he died before he had the chance to atone for these deeds, before he could see the error of his ways and return to us as a prodigal." Harry thought he had never looked older as he spoke. His voice seemed very tired.

"The boy most of you knew was not this boy. He played Quidditch, he served his house as a prefect, he performed well academically. He was a good brother and a good son," he added, nodding, and Harry turned, seeing Roger Davies standing near the door of the hall. "We mourn that boy, for it is he whom we lost. A great man said, *It is a man's own mind,*

not his enemy or foe, that lures him to evil ways. Evan's mind, sadly, lured him to evil ways. We must all fight this war in our own minds, we must resist the lure of evil. Unfortunately, Evan did not. Let us remember for a moment the Evan Davies we all knew." The hall was silent again as some students bowed their heads, and Harry saw that some of the Ravenclaw girls were crying quietly. But Dumbledore, Harry was pleased to see, did not ask the students to drink to Evan's memory, to say his name. He remembered Moody urging them to fight *the darkness within*. Clearly, Evan Davies had lost that fight.

When it seemed that the silence had stretched on long enough, Dumbledore resumed speaking. He smiled and clapped his hands together once, then turned to look at Severus Snape. "We have, of course, some good things to celebrate this year. There is the return of your Potions Master and head of Slytherin House, Professor Snape." Snape nodded, his lip curled. Cheering erupted from the Slytherin table, and then Harry, looking straight at Snape, stood and starting clapping slowly, and then Hermione also stood, clapping. The Slytherins--including Zabini and Crabbe and Goyle, who had been cleared of taking the professors prisoner--looked shocked, as all of the students in the hall joined them, and the other teachers too, until everyone present was standing and applauding the return to Hogwarts of Severus Snape.

Snape looked around the hall in shock, and turned to look at his colleagues with equal shock. The sound of the applause was deafening, bouncing off the stone walls and floor, and Harry actually thought he saw the Potions Master flick away a single rogue tear that had trickled from one eye. He, of all people, had never expected such a tribute.

When the applause finally died down, Dumbledore continued speaking. "I have another bit of happy news. Because the Death Eater Peter Pettigrew was finally apprehended and he confessed to staging his own apparent murder, my good friend Sirius Black--" the students gasped "-- is now a free man." He waved his hand toward the door to the anteroom, which opened. Sirius stepped into the Great Hall, causing another gasp to ripple through the collected students. He had a new short haircut and a broad grin, striding toward the head table to take an empty seat next to the headmaster. Dumbledore shook his hand, grinning, then turned back to the students as Sirius took his seat.

"Sadly, Professor Lupin," he nodded at the werewolf, seated on the other side of Sirius, "finds that he is unable to continue to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, and we will miss him, but he will not be a stranger to Hogwarts," he added, looking at Lupin and smiling. He did not mention Lupin biting Ron. "To take his place, we are privileged to have a person whom some of you know, Ms. Arabella Figg, who also happens to be the sister of another former professor, Alastor Moody." He smiled at Harry and Draco Malfoy. Harry's jaw dropped. *Mrs. Figg!* He remembered what it was

like to be taught by her brother, and what it was like to live with her. *Seventh year should be interesting*, he thought.

"Finally," he went on, "we must acknowledge that there are some people without whom Professor Snape would not have been recovered, Peter Pettigrew would not have been captured and Sirius Black would not have been cleared. Those people are the members of the Hogwarts Dueling Club, led by the captain, Harry Potter. Now, what most of you do not know is that last year, I created an honor I have named the Order of the Phoenix. I awarded this honor to the students who helped to apprehend another Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy, and I ask those students to come forward now and to display the emblem of the Order." Harry took his Order of the Phoenix pin from his robe pocket and attached it to the front of his robes, just below his prefect badge, understanding now why Dumbledore had asked him to bring this to the leaving feast. Hermione, Ginny and Ron did the same at the Gryffindor table before getting up and moving toward the front, and turning his head, Harry saw that Draco Malfoy had done the same. The five of them stood before Dumbledore, facing the other students, as the headmaster continued speaking.

"I am very proud of all of the members of the Dueling Club, and it seems only right and fitting for *all* of you to likewise be inducted into the Order of the Phoenix, for your exemplary work in fighting dark wizards and resisting the lure of the darkness that dwells in each of us. As I call your name, please come forward and join the other members of the Order."

He pulled a scroll from his pocket and unrolled it. "Susan Bones," he called, and Susan stood at the Hufflepuff table, shaking her hair into her face shyly, then came forward hesitantly to stand next to Ginny, who turned to grin at her. "Millicent Bulstrode; Cho Chang..." As they made their way to the front, Harry looked at Cho. He wasn't sure he could ever make things right with her. First he was responsible for Cedric's death, and now he had put her together with the heir of Voldemort and he had died as well....

"Justin Finch-Fletchley. Mariah Kirkner...." Harry noticed that Mariah was *not* shy about accepting acknowledgment for her role in retrieving Snape. She walked with her head held high (after giving some of the other Slytherins a withering look). "Ernest MacMillan; Parvati Patil; Anthony Perugia; Ruth Pelta; and Liam Quirke."

They were finally all standing at the front, facing their fellow students. With a wave of Dumbledore's hand, the ten new members of the Order of the Phoenix found that they had the same emblems pinned to their robes that the original five members bore, and with another wave of his hand, the remaining students in the Great Hall, rose to their feet as one, stamping and cheering and clapping, and Harry turned to see Ginny and Draco Malfoy smiling at each other, turning slightly red, and the other members of the Dueling Club also showed signs of being simultaneously

pleased and bashful as the racket continued, and the professors joined them in a more orderly fashion, standing and clapping enthusiastically but politely. Harry turned his head and caught Snape's eye, nodding at him. Snape gave him a very small smile and nodded back, and Harry turned once more to the crowd of students before him, cheering on their champions in the Order of the Phoenix.

* * * * *

It was stranger than strange to be boarding the Hogwarts Express again. Harry found himself staring out the window during much of the trip, mostly to avoid looking at Draco Malfoy and Ginny sitting opposite him, looking deliriously happy. Hermione sat next to them, also looking out the window, petting Crookshanks as Ginny was petting Mackenzie, also seeming like she was trying to ignore their happiness. Ron sat next to Harry with his own silver-striped cat, Argent, on his lap as he read. Harry leaned over once and saw that it was a book about martial arts, with detailed illustrations of a man doing what looked like a complicated dance, rather than practicing moves that would injure an opponent. Harry looked up at Ron, at the lone grey lock of hair on his brow, and sighed at the injustices of the world.

Suddenly, Ginny looked at her brother in amazement. "Oh! Ron!"

Ron looked up from what he was reading, frowning. "What, Ginny?"

"I just thought of something; you'll have to be very careful about your cat from now on."

Ron looked down at the small sleeping feline, frowning, then back up at his sister. "Why?"

Ginny smiled mischievously at him. "Because of the name you gave her. Did you completely forget what it means?"

Now Hermione opened her eyes wide too. "That's--that's just--if I didn't completely disbelieve all forms of Divination except for Arithmancy--"

Finally, Harry got it. Ron's cat, Argent had a name that meant "silver" in Latin. Ron made a face at Hermione and his sister.

"Get a grip. It's just a *name*."

Shaking his head, he went back to reading. Harry looked down at the cat suspiciously, wondering, wondering....

When they reached King's Cross, they hauled their trunks onto the platform amidst the hubbub of families welcoming their children home. Hermione ran to her mother and father, and Mrs. Weasley embraced

Ginny and then Ron with a worried look that Harry hadn't seen there before Ron had become a werewolf. His father put his hand on his youngest son's shoulder, looking grim, and Ron smiled at him, but he looked like he was forcing it a bit.

Ginny turned back to hug and kiss her boyfriend goodbye, and Harry saw them whispering to each other softly, then smiling. Then she separated from him and followed her parents. She raised her hand to Harry, but didn't come to him as she had the previous year; no goodbye kiss for Harry. He swallowed the lump that had developed in his throat when he'd been watching them, and then decided to just get it over with and stepped toward her boyfriend after she had disappeared through the barrier with her parents and brother.

"Malfoy! Er--Draco. I--I have to talk to you."

The other boy stopped and looked at him, surprised. He nodded. "Okay, Potter." Harry remembered that they'd never really gotten the hang of using their first names, even after working together during the previous summer. Once they were back at Hogwarts, it seemed natural to go back to their surnames. Harry remembered the boy who was his best friend in his other life, the boy whom he had always called "Draco" and who had always called him "Harry," and wondered whether they would ever have anything approaching that in this life.

"I--I have something I want to give you, Malfoy."

Harry withdrew the two basilisk amulets from his robe pocket and held them out to him by the silver-colored chains. Malfoy didn't touch them but looked at Harry with narrowed eyes.

"What's this about, then?"

Harry hesitated. "I--I happened to come across another amulet like the one that Ginny gave me. But--but then I realized that I had no one to give the other one to. I would have given it to Ginny, since she survived the basilisk in the Chamber, but--but that seemed too much like a 'couple' sort of thing to do," he lied. "We're--we're not a couple," he said with a catch in his voice. "But you and Ginny are. You two should have them. Here," he said, thrusting them at the other boy again, who reached out and took the chains now. He looked up at Harry.

"Are you sure? I mean--one of these was a present. You're not supposed to give presents back."

Harry looked down. "I'm sure. Take them. Give her one of them." He looked up at the other boy. "But if you ever," he said in a low shaking voice, "ever hurt her in any way, you will have me to answer to."

Draco Malfoy took in this threat, oddly delivered by someone who had just given him a gift, and swallowed, hesitating only a moment before putting both amulets in his robe pocket. Then he blinked up at Harry and suddenly, it was as though a different person was standing before him.

"So," Harry said with a smile, "are you ready for another summer of gardening?" He had switched into holiday mode, and Draco Malfoy smiled back uncertainly. Harry could see that he was disconcerting the other boy by switching gears so abruptly, but he had to; he had to put out of his mind what he'd seen when he'd last grasped the amulet, had to forget what it was Draco Malfoy and Ginny were doing in the greenhouse....

The Slytherin boy nodded. "All set. Except now--now I have to spend the summer with my *professor*. Can you believe it? Nanny Bella teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, she's Moody's sister. Should be interesting. I'm only going to be working with you until the end of July, though. After my birthday, I'm going to go stay with Sirius. I would go now, but he's just getting settled back in with his family, so the Dursleys are letting me stay with them for a little while."

Draco Malfoy grinned now. "I can't *wait* for my birthday. Once I'm of-age, I won't have to worry about doing magic out of school. And I already know how to Apparate, so I can apply for my license and take my test." Harry thought he looked pretty thoroughly recovered now from Harry's threat and the surprise of the gift.

Harry laughed. "We should all be very, very afraid. You could pop up *anywhere* now."

The other boy laughed too. "And I will!"

Harry watched him turn toward the barrier and disappear. He looked at the empty platform, hearing the echo of the voices, feeling the rightness of being back in this life again and yet always, at the back of his mind, remembering a different world, a world which was very wrong, but which had some things in it he would never know here.

Pulling his trunk behind him and carrying Hedwig's cage in his other hand, he approached the barrier, bracing himself to see the Dursleys again and return to his life in Surrey.

* * * * *

Things were the same as ever at number four Privet Drive. After dinner, Harry evaded Dunkirk and went out for a walk, his feet taking him unerringly toward the graveyard in the village. He paused for a moment at Dudley's grave, then walked up the rising ground to his parents'

gravestone as the sun dipped lower in the sky, gilding the orderly little houses in the village and the trees scattered here and there in the graveyard, planted to shelter the resting places of loved ones. When he reached it he knelt down with a fatigue of the soul, as though a great weight were pushing him to the ground. He stared at his parents' names on the granite, knowing he was kneeling over their bodies. He remembered again seeing them sitting by the fire in their cottage, after they'd put their baby to bed--their last peaceful moments before the world was changed forever. That was something, at least. He had had the chance to see them like that, just living their lives normally. A young family at home. But then it suddenly occurred to him that he was kneeling over someone else's body too, someone whose name wasn't on the marker.

In about a month he would be seventeen. He was as excited about this as Draco Malfoy, although he hadn't let on. However, he wasn't seventeen yet; if anyone noticed he was doing this, he would have another black mark on his record, although the first one was five years ago now, and it was Dobby, not he, who had really done the hovering charm in his house (and Dobby would probably admit that, now). No one had ever held against him that he'd inflated his Aunt Marge, so that didn't count. It would be worth it, he felt. It would be absolutely worth anything they wanted to do to punish him for doing magic out of school....

He took his wand from his pocket and aimed it carefully at the stone, carving carefully, surely, humming the tune of the *Kaddish* that Ruth had taught him (he couldn't bring himself to pronounce the words), and when he was done at last, he sat back, staring at his handiwork, waiting for the tears which did not come. Perhaps he was cried out; he'd mourned her already, her and too many other people to count, even though he was only sixteen. Until the previous September, he hadn't even known she'd almost existed, that she'd been snuffed out at the same time as his mother.

He reached out and traced the letters with his fingers; the stone was still slightly warm from the magic that had created the carving. The letters were clear and neat, and he wondered briefly whether anyone would think it odd (or even notice) that the marker that had formerly memorialized James Potter and Lily Evans Potter now bore a third name:

JAMIE ROSE POTTER

1982-1997

BELoved SISTER

He remembered her then, conjuring up in his brain every memory he could, trying to make her real to him, wishing she'd really lived in this world so he could talk to someone about her. He remembered being with

her and watching Remus Lupin being taken away by the Longbottoms; he remembered the previous year in their lives, and their other years at Hogwarts; he remembered the look on her face when he left home to go to the castle at the beginning of his first year, leaving her with only the twins for company. There were other times he remembered her looking even sadder: Stuart's funeral, a few times when she saw Draco paying attention to some other girl and she was pretending that it didn't matter to her, and most of all, on her fifteenth birthday, watching her brother being arrested for killing their mother....

He shook himself, trying to rid himself of the negative images. Instead, he concentrated on what he'd seen in the Pensieve, the holiday at the seaside, and that was better, that was a comfort. In the years to come, he knew that he would never forget that image, that it was burned into his brain. He would make that his touchstone, the thing that could bring him back to himself and center him.

He rose and left the graveyard, walking slowly back toward Privet Drive as the sky began to darken. *Le temps du loup*, he remembered Hermione saying. Twilight. *The time of the wolf*. Yes; the rest of Ron's life would be the time of the wolf now, he thought. It was hard to focus on good things when there were so many bad things that seemed overwhelming in their magnitude and difficulty, but at least Ron's best friend was already an Animagus. For the rest of his life, when he changed into a wolf, whether or not he had Wolfsbane Potion, Ron would have his best friend by his side to accompany him, to walk under the moon with him. He understood now his father's and Sirius' motivation for becoming Animagi. He felt he understood his father as never before. He hadn't thought about him much since talking to his ghost in the Quidditch changing rooms, but he thought of him being with his mother again now, the way he was supposed to be before Harry changed time, and now he thought of Jamie being with them too, and that helped him feel a little better about missing his sister.

Before he went in the house, he stood with his head thrown back, gazing at the sapphire sky and remembering again the image from the Pensieve, the bright summer day on the beach. That was far better, he thought, than having the basilisk amulet to calm him. He had chosen to give the amulet and its twin away, but it just as easily could have been lost, or stolen. No one could take this memory away from him, ever....

In a world only he remembered he would forever see the three children holding hands and running, the tangle of thin, tanned arms and legs, the sun glinting off the two black heads and the one nearly white one; he would ever hear the echo of their high-pitched laughter and feel their youthful naiveté and confidence like a fist around his heart as they launched themselves fearlessly toward the indifferent wrath of the mighty sea.

~ ~ THE END ~ ~